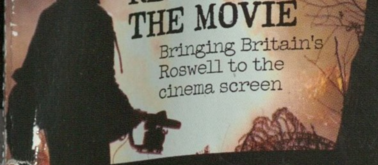

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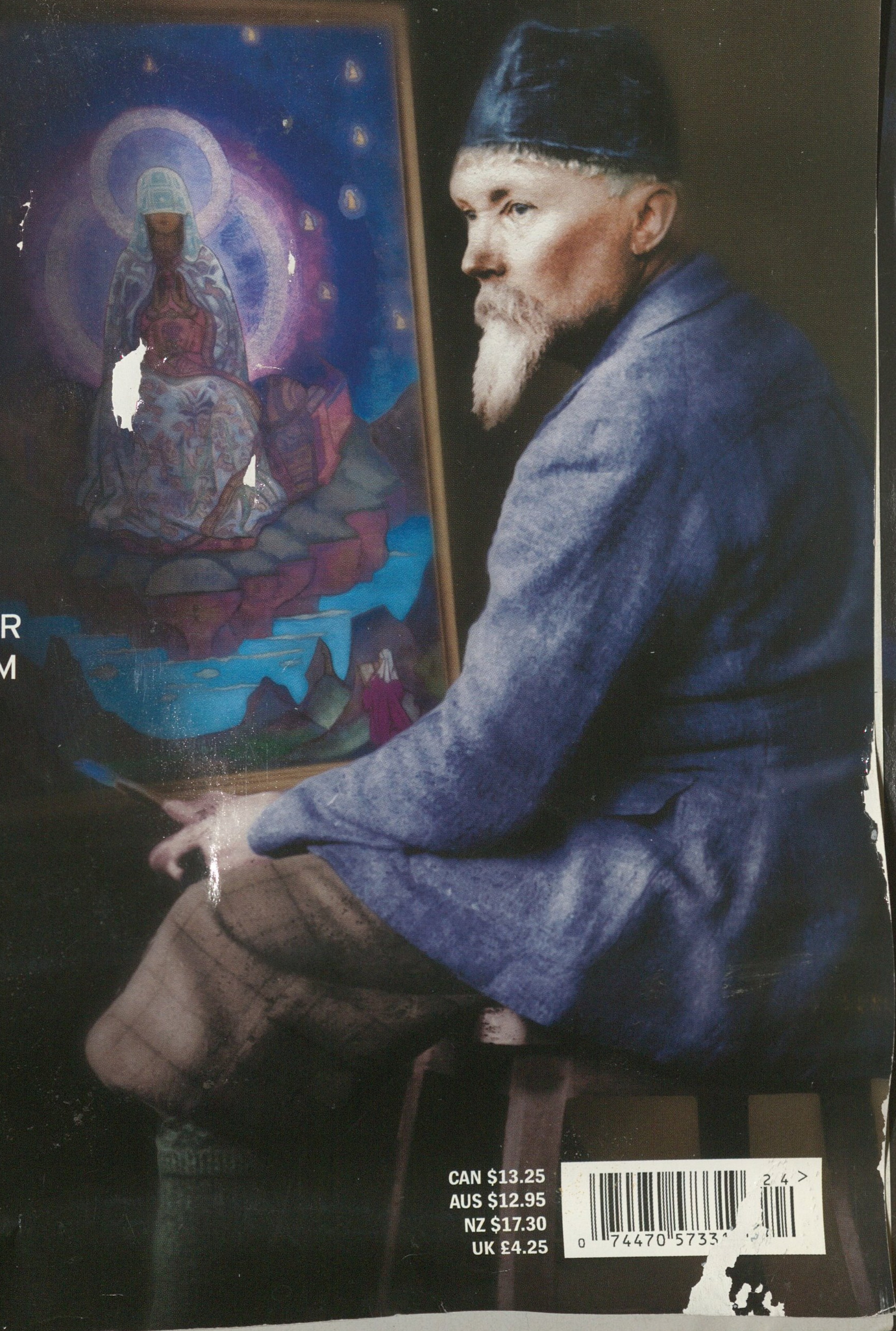

OCCULT AGENT OF THE EAST

NICHOLAS ROERICH AND THE SEARCH FOR THE HIDDEN KINGDOM OF SHAMBHALA

"I'M NOT A CONSPIRACY THEORIST, BUT..."

WHY ARE WE STILL SO SCEPTICAL ABOUT CONSPIRACIES?

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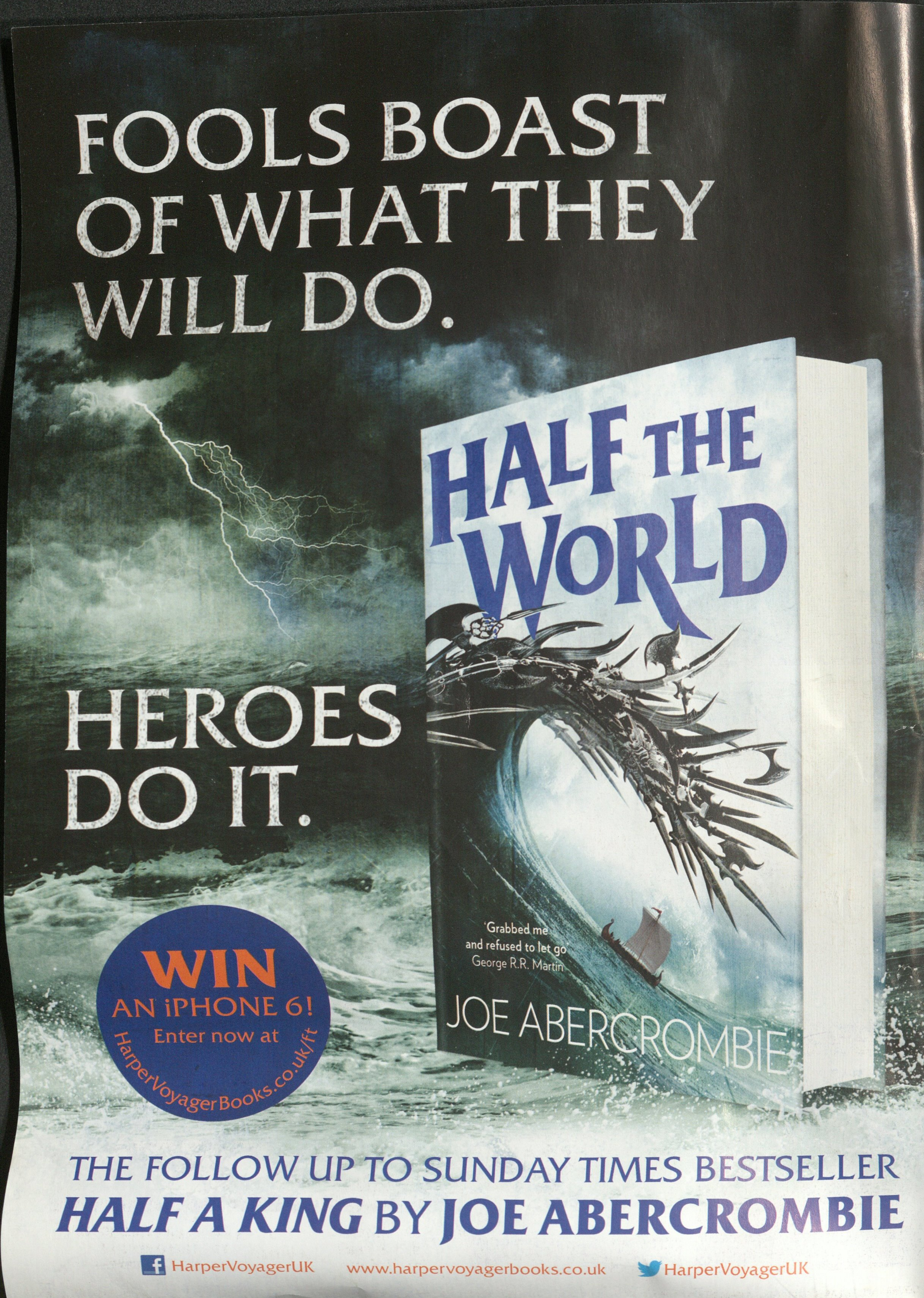
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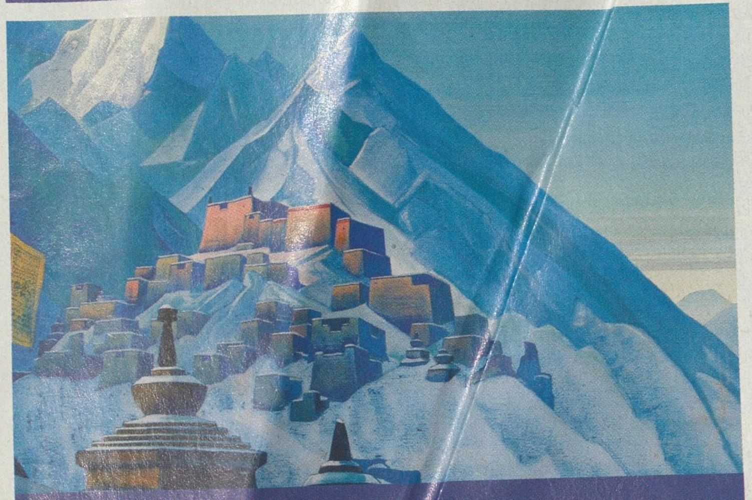
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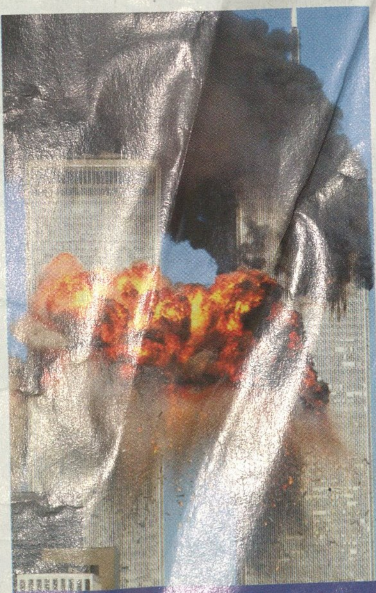
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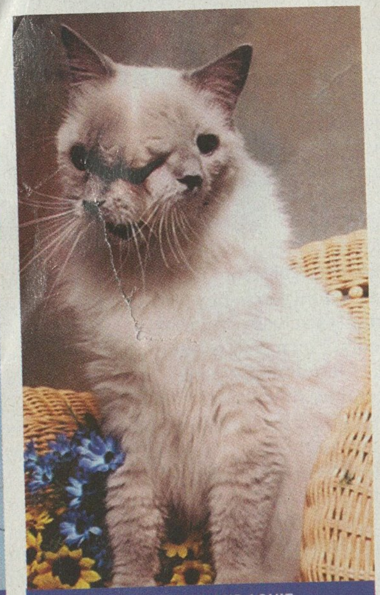
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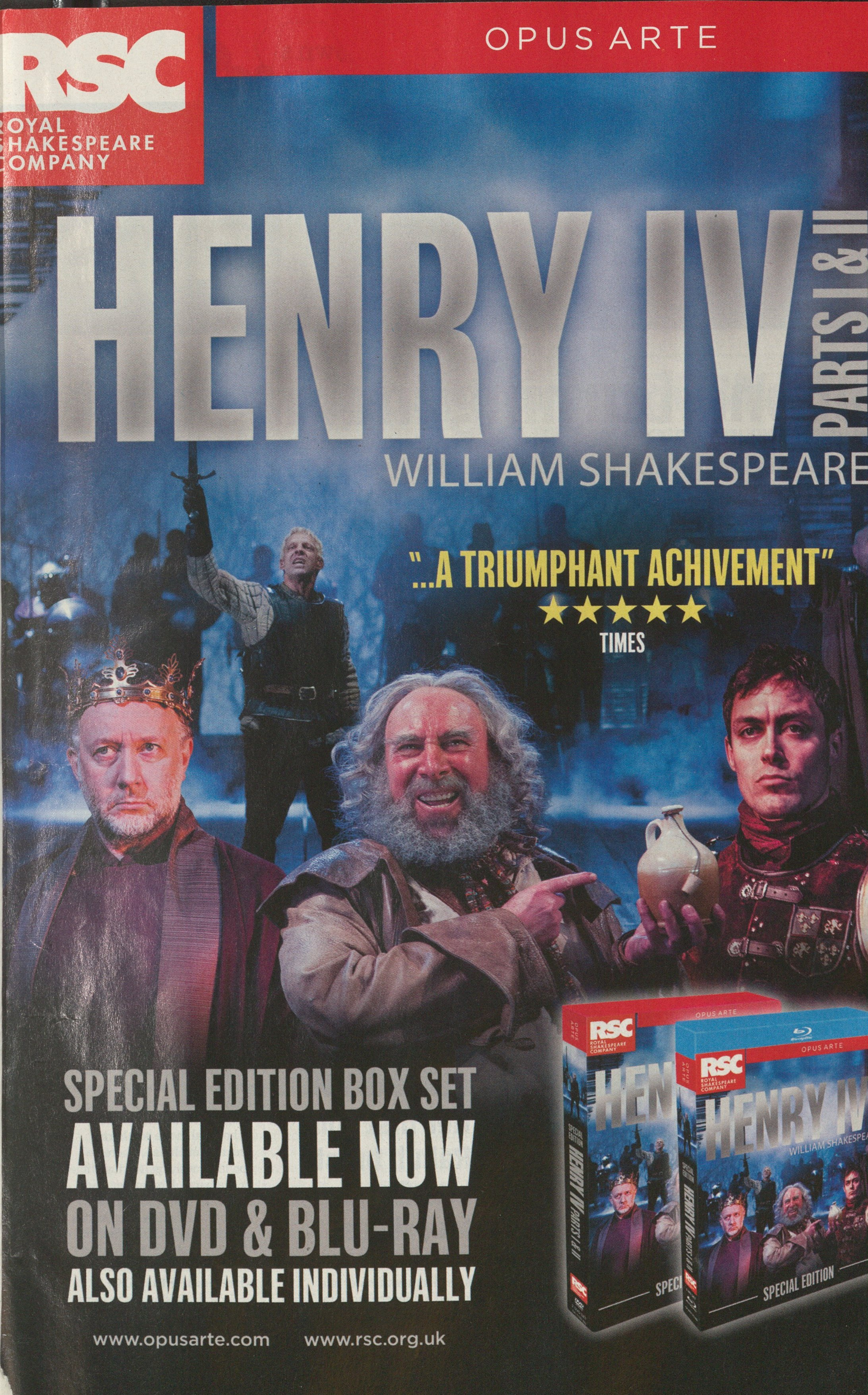
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editorial

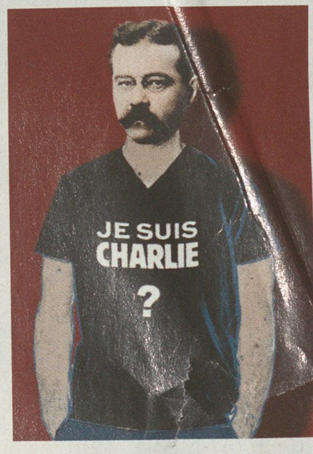
Conspiracy central

We're rapidly approaching the conclusion of one of our longest-running series: the Fortean Times Random Dictionary of the Damned, by the mysterious Hierophant's Apprentice (HA), which debuted back in 2004 (**FT185:53-55**). The first entry was on 'The Cosmic Joker', appropriately enough for an issue with a theme of deception and containing articles on D-Day, Derren Brown and magic in wartime (as well as a notorious spoof FBI column – 'Charles B Horn and the Senders' – that garnered one of the angriest mailbags in our 42 years of publishing.

HA wraps up his wide-ranging interrogation of the Damned in all its diversity with a two-part 'Reflections on Forteanism' (pp48-51; to conclude in FT326). While considering the numerous ways in which art, ambiguity and the 'irrational' have all survived the Enlightenment – which, he argues, has "become warped into a dogmatic rejection of (almost) everything but what is material and therefore dissectable" – HA ponders the place of conspiracy theory as a peculiar subset of Fort's 'damned data', noting its intellectual obduracy (it's "impossible to argue a conspiracy theorist out of a given interpretation of events"), sponge-like eclecticism ("nothing we're told is true") and cognitively dissonant ability to believe, simultaneously, in mutually exclusive theories (Princess Di both "faked her own demise" and "was murdered"). While all that might place conspiracy theory as a cranky subcultural discourse like believerist ufological zealotry – another mode of thought that is perfectly happy to distinguish itself from consensus reality – it has, particularly in recent years, become a notably widespread phenomenon. A third of US citizens apparently believe that 9/11 was an inside job, despite the repeated assurances of the media and academia that 'conspiracy theory' is a species of paranoid thinking with no place in the mainstream.

Matthew Dentith argues against such a blanket dismissal of conspiracy theory elsewhere in this issue (pp36-39), on the pragmatic grounds that in a world where conspiracies are know to happen, and in which we attempt to make sense of them, we are all conspiracy theorists now, like it or not. Any other position, given the facts, is sheer foolishness.

But to the simple fact that conspiracies – and, indeed, attempts to cover them up – happen, we should add a not unrelated one: that we exist in a cultural climate in which distrust of the political mainstream has reached heights (or should that be depths?) at which early commentators like Karl Popper would surely have boggled. This means that conspiracy theory now dogs the heels of mainstream news stories with a persistence and rapidity of response unthinkable before the days of the Internet and social media.



The recent massacre at the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo* is a prime example. The great and the good may have lined up to have their photos taken with the masses (or posted their selfies on Twitter), and to proclaim 'Je suis Charlie', but such proclamations of solidarity presuppose that one one knows what one is defending, and who or what one is defending it from. Elsewhere, there was neither defiance nor hand wringing... just the pinging of conspiracy theories across cyberspace.

Even before the bodies of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists were cold and while their suspected killers, the Kouachi brothers, were still at large, accusations of a 'false flag' operation were doing the rounds online. Such theories have subsequently been gaining both additional detail (see, for example, www.activistpost.com/2015/01/15-signs-charlie-hebdo-attack-was-false.html) and traction, even surfacing as editorial opinion in the pages of *Pravda* (http://english.pravda.ru/opinion/columnists/15-01-2015/129525-charlie_hebdo_false_flag-0/) – a fascinating example of conspiracy theory being regurgitated as mainstream editorial for an explicitly ideological purpose; almost a form of meta-conspiracy.

What Matthew Dentith argues in relation to 9/11 is just as apposite here: whatever you believe about the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, you believe in a conspiracy. Who you believe was behind it – organised Islamist militants, disenfranchised lone wolves from the *banlieus*, the French state, or an international cabal of pro-Washington lapdogs, will depend on your own political leanings, point of view and preferred spot on the crazy-o-meter.

DAVID R SUTTON

BOB RICKARD

Paul Sieveking
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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!
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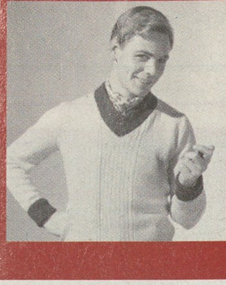
A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

strangedays



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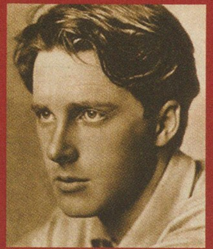

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Second burning Indian baby

Spontaneous infant combustion, Munchausen syndrome by proxy or dodgy building materials?

An Indian Dalit ('untouchable') woman whose baby boy allegedly 'spontaneously combusted' has had a second child go up in flames. Rajeshwari Karnan, then 23, was put under heavy public scrutiny in 2013 after her first son, Rahul (pictured at right, with Rajeshwari), burst into flames four times, leaving the infant with burns to his head, chest and thighs. The fires started happening when he was just nine days old and continued for over two months. While doctors carried out numerous tests, they were never able to prove whether or not it was spontaneous human combustion [**FT307:18**].

A theory to account for SHC put forward in 2011 postulated that a disordered metabolism could lead to ketosis (the excessive formation in the body of ketone or acetone bodies, due to incomplete oxidation of fats). Highly inflammable acetone could then gather in the fatty tissues and be ignited by a static spark from fabric or hair-combing [**FT283:9**]. However, tests showed that acetone levels in Rahul's blood were negligible, and moreover there was "no feasible amount" of methane or ethanol gas emission to account for the fires, according to the head of the pædiatrics department at Kilpauk Medical College in Chennai, south India, where the child was treated. The mysterious fires stopped after doctors advised the parents to keep Rahul hydrated, in an air-conditioned environment, and to dress him in cotton clothes.

NATHAN G / BARCROFT INDIA

This year, Rajeshwari once again turned up in hospital with another burned baby boy, who reportedly caught fire on 15 January when he was six days old, and had five per cent burns on his feet. Tests were run and the baby was due to be monitored by surveillance cameras for a month while he was in the neonatal intensive care unit of Kilpauk Medical College. Rajeshwari said she found him on fire after returning from the bathroom. "I had gone to use the bathroom which is just behind the house. When I was coming back, I heard my baby screaming and ran in to find his feet on fire. I quickly doused him with water and rushed to the local hospital," she said.

Her first son, Rahul, burst into flames four times

The family, who also have a three-year-old daughter, Narmadha, were driven out of their village in Villipuram district, 200km (124 miles) south of Chennai, after news of their first burning baby became public. Neighbours suspected them of deliberately setting fire to the baby, and the father's family also kicked them out after Rahul went up in flames for the third time. While doctors raised concerns that Rahul could have been the victim of abuse, possibly a case of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, there was reportedly no evidence of damage to his internal organs, and his father, Dalit farm labourer Karnan Perumal, insisted that he and his wife would never be "crazy [enough] to burn our own baby". Another explanation suggested for the burned children was the building material used in the family's village. Several homes burned to the ground in 2004 because of highly flammable phosphorous used in the buildings, a fact confirmed by local fire officials. *Mumbai Mirror, 18 Aug 2013; Times of India, The Hindu, 19 Jan; news.com.au, 20 Jan 2015.*

- There was a similar case in China in 1990, when a four-year-old boy called Tong Tangjiang caught fire and was rushed to hospital in the southern province of Hunan, where he spontaneously ignited four times in two hours. His mother said he had set fire to a mattress and narrowly missed setting his grandmother's hair on fire when she got too close. The child was only completely comfortable when naked [**FT55:25**].

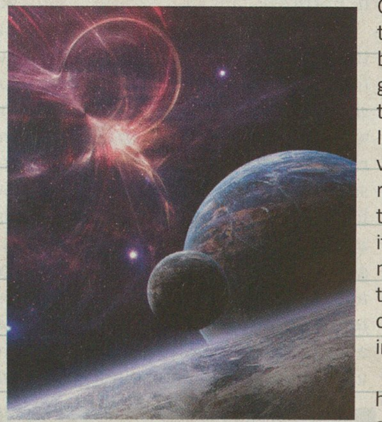
For a discussion of the various theories put forward to account for SHC, see **FT281:14-15**.

The Conspirasphere

Will 2015 see Earth's poles shift and its civilisations laid low? NOEL ROONEY tracks the current trajectory of Nibiru, the Planet X that keeps on giving...

It was while I was browsing the copious material online about Planet X, the late Zechariah Sitchin's Annunaki RV – otherwise known as Nibiru – that I learned how the *Titanic* disaster was in fact a skirmish in the internecine war for control of the Federal Reserve Bank in the USA (all the benevolent bankers were on the boat, apparently). That was just before I found out that pyramids are really big and heavy because they are designed to balance the Earth; an idea I found myself characterising as the 'bollocks as ballast' theory. Nibiru and its loopy satellites have a lot to offer.

Why am I writing about Nibiru? Didn't that meme die with its inventor? Not at all: despite a few false calls (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 come to mind) the big red bogeyman is still there (or perhaps still not there) and according to many of the Conspirasphere's devotedly persistent content providers, it's on its way in 2015. Again.



Roughly every 3,600 years (or precisely every 3,657 years by the reckoning of the delightfully monickered Lavender Rose), Nibiru and its attendant planetoids – the number of which seem to this writer to have grown somewhat over the years – sashay into the Solar System spreading mayhem, starting and ending civilisations, shifting poles and destroying the odd planet; all in an epoch's work for the industrious Annunaki. It's as if a gusset of their capacious reptilian underwear got irretrievably hitched over the Babylonian bedpost; they are as compelled by us as we are by them.

The Signs are curiously reminiscent of the signs of the Apocalypse (and Ragnarok, and the New Age, and the last hurrah of the NWO, and the turn of the Kali Yuga, delete as applicable): extreme weather events, natural disasters and ominous accidents – one site I visited offered ships running aground as a tell-tale trigger; another, rather predictably, suggested south-east Asian aircraft coming to grief, though I struggled to see how this could be a regular part of the pattern. The standard meteorology of the mad is as versatile as it is voracious, however, and canonical items such as pole shift and volcanism can be supplemented by all manner of news-driven ephemera.

Several online sources included diagrams of the approach trajectory: there is a wonderful precision and specificity in these diagrams which is rendered all the more impressively quaint by their blithe independence from any evidentiary basis. And that's the point, ultimately: the Conspirasphere is a territory to be mapped by reference to a geography invisible to the uninitiated eye. The Internet is the perfect vehicle for the wilder reaches of conspiracy thinking because its structure is a metaphorical match for the inexhaustible matrix of connections waiting in the ether.

I was also struck by how many of the sites and contributors are devoutly Christian. There is no discomfort with the patently pagan nature of the material they are using; it's all grist for an Augustinian syncretism that displays a tolerance very few of these people could manage in their mundane transactions. In conspiracy heaven, there is even room for bankers.

http://beforeitsnews.com/space/2014/05/planet-nibiru-going-to-earth-at-august-2014-2479058.html; www.nibiruupdate.com; http://yowusa.com/planetx/

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Badgers force road closure

Valley News (South Wiltshire & North Dorset), May 2014.

Call for Cadbury's jihad

D.Telegraph, 28 May 2014.

Dragons overtake eagles in income-related rankings

Times Higher Education, 15 May 2014.

Top school has spots

Bournemouth Daily Echo, 14 May 2014.

CROCODILE INJURED BY FALLING ACCOUNTANT

Moscow Times, –May 2014.

Honey bees could have say on policy

Western Daily Press, 23 May 2014.

Nuisance Hull drunk 'kidnapped by aliens'

Hull Daily Mail, 19 May 2014.

SIDELINES...

NUKEY BROWN

The first brown bear in a century has been caught on automatic camera near the Chernobyl nuclear disaster zone. The exclusion zone was abandoned in 1986 by 100,000 people, who were replaced by wolves, lynx, boar and elk. *Sun, 2 Dec 2014.*

MONEY IN MOTION

Mark Smith of MIT has co-founded OpenBiome, a non-profit stool bank for fæcal transplantation, in Medford, Massachusetts. Donors are paid $40 per stool and can earn up to $250 a week, which is what hospitals in 33 US states pay per (healthy) sample. "Deposits" can restore good bacteria in the gut and fight *C difficile*, irritable bowel syndrome, etc. *Boston Globe, 19 Feb; MX News (Sydney), 17 Oct 2014.*

PEACE & LOVE

A man called Mr Hippy was caught growing 28 cannabis plants in the garage of his house in Lincoln. Gregory Hippy, 36, admitted cultivation but denied selling the weed for profit. *D.Mirror, 7 Nov 2014.*

DIETARY INNOVATION

On the Oregon coast, giant green anemones *Anthopleura xanthogrammica* have developed a taste for nestlings that fall from the cliffs above their pools. It's not known if the birds were still alive when swallowed. *BBC Wildlife, July 2014.*

MARTIN ROSS

PLANETARY NEWS

UNDERGROUND OCEAN, NEW PLANETS AND A CONTRACTING UNIVERSE

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

LEFT: A diamond from Brazil which was found to contain the mineral ringwoodite.

BURIED OCEAN

A vast reservoir of water lies beneath the Earth's crust – potentially transforming our understanding of how the planet was formed. The water is locked up in a mineral called ringwoodite about 400 miles (640km) beneath the Earth's surface. Geophysicist Steve Jacobsen, who co-authored a study in the journal *Science*, said the discovery suggested our water might have come from way underground, driven to the surface by geological activity, rather than by being deposited by icy comets or asteroids hitting the young planet (the prevailing hypothesis). "I think we are finally seeing evidence for a whole-Earth water cycle, which may help explain the vast amount of liquid water on the surface of our habitable planet," said Jacobsen. "Scientists have been looking for this missing deep water for decades."

Jacobsen and his colleagues are the first to provide direct evidence that there may be water in an area of the Earth's mantle known as the transition zone. They base their findings on a study of a vast underground region extending across most of the interior of the United States, using a network of seismometers and a series of experiments on rocks simulating the high pressure found at 400-odd miles down – around 200,000 atmospheres. The mineral ringwoodite, a type of olivine named after geophysicist Ed Ringwood who first identified it, has a crystal structure that acts like a sponge, making it attract hydrogen and trap water. If just one per cent of the weight of mantle rock in the transition zone were water, it would be equivalent to nearly three times the amount of water in Earth's oceans.

The latest research follows the analysis of a small diamond found in 2008 in a shallow riverbed in Mato Grosso, western Brazil, that contains ringwoodite, offering the first strong evidence that there is lots of water in the transition zone. Researchers said the gemstone, which is oblong and about 5mm long, was blasted to the surface from a depth of about 300 miles (480km) during a volcanic eruption of molten rock called kimberlite. Most diamonds used in jewellery form at much shallower depths, about 100 miles (160km) down. Those that form in the transition zone are called super-deep diamonds and are distinguished by their battered appearance and low nitrogen content. *Guardian, 13 Mar, 14 June 2014.*

STEVE JACOBSEN / NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

LEFT: A crystal of blue ringwoodite being crushed in a lab experiment.

NASA / JPL

LEFT: An artist's impression of Kepler 186f, a rocky, Earth-like planet that could hold liquid water on its surface.

A TWIN FOR EARTH, MAYBE...

One of eight new planets spied in distant solar systems has usurped the title of "most Earth-like alien world". All eight were picked out by Nasa's Kepler space telescope, taking its tally of such exoplanets past 1,000. However, only three sit safely within the habitable zone of their host star – and one in particular is rocky, like Earth, as well as only slightly warmer.

The three potentially habitable planets join Kepler's "hall of fame", which now boasts eight fascinating planetary prospects. The most Earth-like of the newly found heavenly bodies, known as Kepler 438b, is probably even more similar to our home than Kepler 186f – previously regarded as our most likely twin. At 12 per cent larger than Earth, the new claimant is bigger than 186f but closer to our temperature, probably receiving just 40 per cent more heat from its sun than we do from ours, so it may well be warmer than here, according to Dr Doug Caldwell from the Seti (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) Institute in California. "And it's around a cooler [red dwarf] star... so your sky would look redder than ours does to us," he said. Kepler 438b is 475 light-years away. We have no idea what it's made of.

Images from the Kepler telescope are used to identify distant planets by observing "transits" – the dimming of a star's light when a planet passes in front of it. Using additional data from Earth-bound telescopes, researchers then try to calculate their size and orbits. Not everything that causes such a dimming eventually turns out to be a planet. At the same time as the eight confirmed new exoplanets were announced by a 26-strong team spanning Nasa and multiple US institutions, the Kepler mission's own scientists released another tranche of more than 500 'candidate' planets, some of which may turn out to be something else entirely.

Even when an exoplanet is confirmed, the question of whether or not it is Earth-like is a fraught one. The size of the habitable, or "Goldilocks" zone, where a planet is far enough from its sun to hold water but not so distant that it freezes, depends on how confident scientists want to be with their guesswork. *BBC News, 7 Jan 2015.*

BACKYARD PLANETS?

At least two undiscovered planets as big as Earth or even larger may be hiding in the outer fringes of the Solar System. They are thought to exist beyond the orbits of Neptune, the furthest true planet from the Sun, and the even more distant 'dwarf planet' Pluto. The evidence comes from observations of a belt of space rocks known as "extreme trans-Neptunian objects", or Etnos. These should be distributed randomly with paths that have certain defined characteristics, but a dozen have unexpected orbital values consistent with them being influenced by the gravitational pull of something unseen, thought to be unknown planets. "The exact number is uncertain, given that the data that we have are limited, but our calculations suggest that there are at least two planets, and probably more," said Prof Carlos de la Fuente Marcos, from the Complutense University of Madrid. The new research, published in *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society: Letters*, is based on analysis of an effect called the "Kozai mechanism", by which a large body disturbed the orbit of a smaller, more distant object. *D.Telegraph, 19 Jan 2015.*

COSMIC REVERSAL

Ever since Hubble's study of red shifts in the 1920s, most cosmologists have likened the Universe to an inflating balloon, decorated with galaxies – implying that it was once far denser, and began with a Big Bang. However, cosmological models rise and fall. Professor Christof Wetternich at the University of Heidelberg has pointed out that the light emitted by atoms is also governed by the masses of their constituent particles, notably their electrons. The way these absorb and emit light would shift towards the blue if atoms were to grow in mass, and to the red if they lost it. Because the frequency or 'pitch' of light increases with mass, Wetternich argues that masses could have been lower long ago. If they had been constantly increasing, the colours of old galaxies would look red-shifted – and the degree of red shift would depend on the distance from Earth. The idea that the Universe is not expanding – and might even be contracting – is shared by several cosmologists. *D.Telegraph, 13 Aug 2.*

SIDELINES...

LYNX AT LARGE

A week after the tiger hunt near Disneyland Paris [**FT322:4**], a lynx was said to be on the loose in Rijkswijk woods near the Hague, Netherlands, attacking people and animals. One walker took up her poodle and ran to the nearest house when it "almost attacked her". There are lynxes in the Ardennes, in Limburg, Belgium – but that's more than 100 miles away. *omroepwest.nl/nieuws, 23 Nov 2014.*

BERLIN WILDLIFE

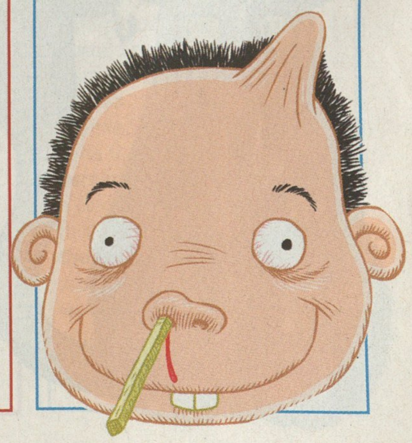
A wallaby was spotted hopping through a field near the A10 autobahn, Berlin's version of the M25, just days after a rhinoceros was found wandering in a small town outside the city. The rhino had escaped from a circus and was recovered, but the wallaby, privately owned, remained at large. *D.Telegraph, 27 Nov 2014.*

TWITCHER'S DOUBLE

While on holiday in Portugal, bird watcher Dave Clifton, 57, caught a tiny blackcap and found it was the same bird he had tagged weeks earlier, 1,500 miles (2,400km) away, near his house in Staffordshire. *D.Mail, 25 Nov 2014.*

BRAIN ON A STICK

Two-year-old Huang Zicheng, from Wuhan in China's Hubei province, thrust a chopstick up his nose, penetrating nearly 3in (7.6cm) into his brain. It caused no damage to nerves or arteries and was successfully removed in a four-hour operation. The child was expected to make a full recovery. *Metro, 22 Sept 2014.*



SIDELINES...

KANG'S ROD

After becoming impotent and losing girlfriends, Kang Niu, 52, threaded a 5in (13cm) steel rod into his penis, but almost died when it pierced his bladder. He ignored the stabbing pain for months, hoping he would be able to pass the rod back out, but finally went to his local hospital in Hengyang, southern China, where doctors removed the rod. *Sun, 11 Oct 2014.*

NATIONAL TREASURE

A sporran worn by the Scottish folk hero Rob Roy was stolen on 21 September from a museum in the recently restored Abbotsford House near Melrose, Scotland, once the home of Sir Walter Scott. *D.Telegraph, 25 Sept 2014.*

SIR, YOU'RE PREGNANT

An unnamed Egyptian bus driver who used his wife's urine in an effort to skirt a drug test found out that the latter was two months' pregnant. *MX News (Sydney). 6 Nov 2014.*

KING COBRA BLAMED

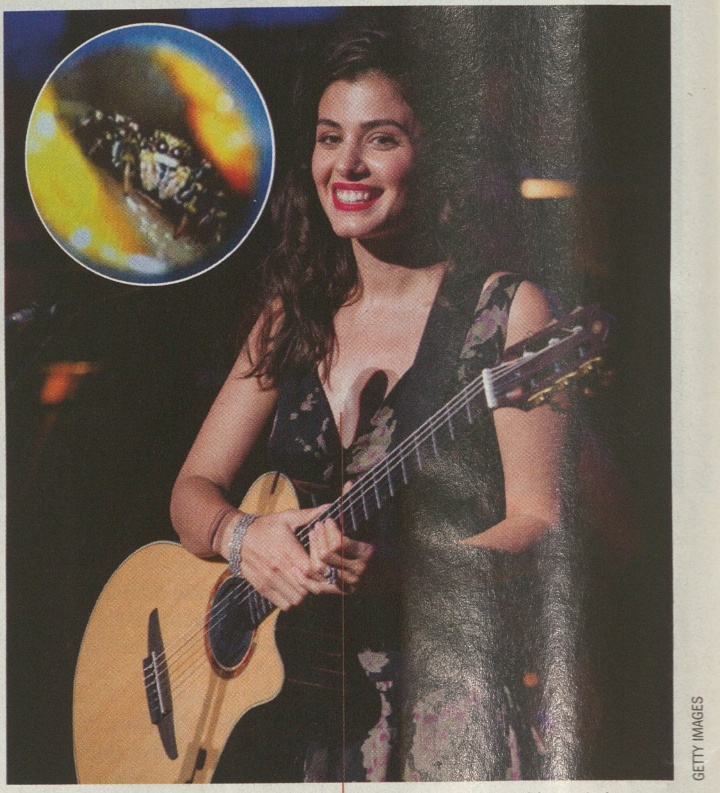
A king cobra could be to blame for the rising number of cats that have gone missing round East Grinstead in West Sussex. Trevor Gamble spotted the snake outside the local hospital. He said he recognised the reptile, which can grow up to 18ft (5.4m) and is the world's largest venomous snake, by its telltale hood. *D.Telegraph, 4 Oct; East Grinstead Courier, 7 Oct 2014.*

MEDICAL BAG

ONE SINGER HAS AN UNWELCOME ARACHNID GUEST WHILE ANOTHER TRIGGERS EPILEPTIC SEIZURES...

SPIDER INSIDE HER

Katie Melua, 30, had a spider removed from her ear after it took up residence for a week. The Georgian-British singer revealed her close encounter with the arachnid on her Instagram account, complete with pictures. She had been bothered by "shuffling and random noises" in her ear and went to an ear specialist, who used a micro-vacuum cleaner to remove the creature. She believes the spider – identified as a member of the *Salticidæ* or jumping spider family – had found its way into a pair of earbud headphones. "I used these old in-ear monitors to block out sound on a flight," she wrote. "A little spider must have been in them and crawled inside my ear and stayed there for the week. Though the thing looked *terrifying* up-close on the doctor's camera, once he took it out it was pretty small, and now it's in this little test tube, alive and seemingly fine." The singer, who had written a song called "Spider's Web", later released it in her garden.

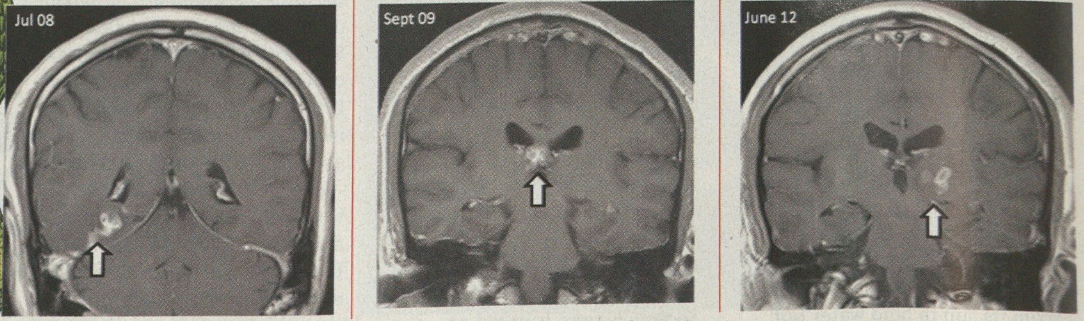


ABOVE: Singer Katie Melua and (inset) the spider that took up residence in her ear.

In 2012, a woman in China discovered a spider had been living in her ear canal for five days. It was removed by pouring a saline solution into her ear. In 2013, sculptor Graeme Lougher from West Sussex wasn't so lucky when doctors removed a live spider from his ear. The creature immediately shot up his nose and his ordeal only ended when he sneezed it out. Larger insects such as cockroaches are not so readily extracted, and there was at one time controversy as to the best method of doing so – before a woman turned up in the casualty department of a New Orleans hospital with one in each ear. "We recognised immediately fate had granted us the opportunity for an elegant comparative therapeutic trial," observed Dr Ronald Stewart in a letter to the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Into one ear, Dr Stewart instilled some drops of mineral oil; "The cockroach succumbed after a valiant struggle, but its removal required much manual dexterity." By contrast, the effect of spraying the local anæsthetic lidocaine into the other ear was much more dramatic. "The cockroach exited the canal at speed and attempted to escape across the floor" before being crushed by a fleet-footed intern. *Mail on Sunday, 2 Nov; Guardian, Sun, 3 Nov; D.Telegraph, 3+10 Nov 2014.*

IT CROSSED HIS MIND

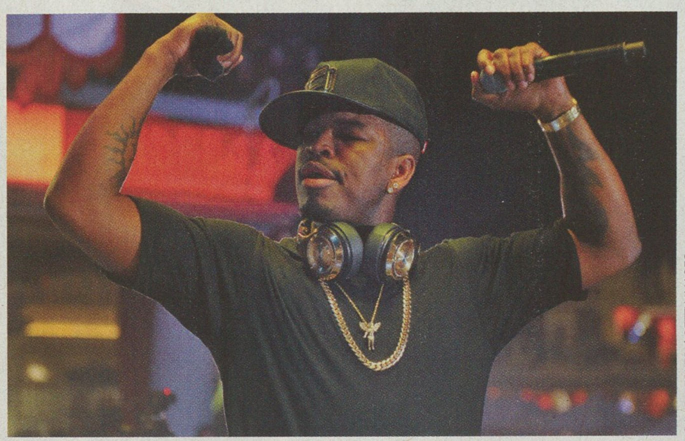
In a case presented in the journal *Genome Biology*, a parasitic tapeworm lived in the brain of a British man for four years before doctors discovered it. The 50-year-old victim first visited doctors in 2008 suffering from headaches, seizures, memory loss and a strange sense of smell. An MRI scan showed a cluster of what appeared to be lesions in the right medial temporal lobe, but specialists were baffled as to the cause. They were more surprised when brain scans over four years showed that the anomaly had travelled 2in (5cm) through tissue, crossing a sensory structure called the thalamus. Doctors at St Thomas's Hospital in London took biopsies and tested the man for diseases including HIV, Lyme disease and syphilis; but in 2012 they were amazed to find that amid his brain tissue was "an approximately 1cm [0.4in] ribbon-shaped cestode larval worm without mouthparts or hooklets". The unnamed man was treated with drugs and has now recovered.



ABOVE: Brain scans show the movement of the tapeworm within the brain of a British man over a four-year period.

The tapeworm *Spirometra erinaceieuropaei* has been reported invading humans only 300 times since 1953, with only two previous cases identified in Europe. It has never been seen before in Britain. The worm causes sparganosis – inflammation of body tissues that can cause seizures, memory loss and headaches. Little is known about its life cycle and biology, but it is thought that people might be infected by consuming tiny crustaceans from lakes, eating raw reptile and amphibian meat, or by using a raw frog poultice – a Chinese remedy to calm sore eyes. When it infects the guts of cats and dogs, it can grow into 5ft (1.5m) adult worms – inside humans, thankfully, it doesn't develop into an adult, remaining in larval form.

It is unclear how the patient (resident in East Anglia) picked it up, but he is of Chinese origin and frequently returned to his home country. Even in China, where the parasite is normally found, there have only been 1,000 cases reported in humans since 1882. Scientists have now sequenced its genome, allowing them to predict the likely effect of known drugs. Its genome contains about 10 times more DNA than any other tapeworm sequences so far, which could explain its ability to invade many different species. Rather than living on the brain tissue of its unknowing victim, the worm is now thought to have simply absorbed nutrients from the man's brain through its body. (The *Daily Telegraph* and Wikipedia state erroneously that the worm in the Chinese man's brain was 10cm long, rather than 1cm.] *genomebiology.com/2014/15/11/510; D.Telegraph, Independent, Guardian, New Scientist, 21 Nov 2014.*



ABOVE: Ne-Yo, whose music triggered epileptic fits in one unfortunate listener.

She had surgery to remove part of her brain

MOTH EARED

Rob Fielding, 43, of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, was reading in bed when a moth landed on his ear. Trying to swat it away, he accidentally pushed it into his ear canal. After three days of buzzing in his ear he underwent a painful 90-minute operation in which his ear canal was prised open and the moth pulled out with forceps – by which time it was dead. "When I felt it move it made me jump out of my skin," he said. *D.Express, 25 Aug 2014.*

ALIMENTARY, MY DEAR WATSON

Doctors removed a South American lungfish from a man's intestine after he apparently inserted it up his bottom. The unidentified man – who has made a full recovery – issued a formal complaint after graphic footage of the operation in Londrina, south Brazil, emerged online. Medics can be seen laughing as they removed the eel-like fish. It was still alive but was later killed. *Sun, 5 Nov 2014.*

WHEN THE VOICE FITS

Zoe Fennessy, 26, had surgery to remove part of her brain in a bid to stop seizures triggered by the tone of Ne-Yo's voice. She has an epileptic fit within seconds of hearing the American R&B singer (real name Shaffer Chimere Smith). She has to wear headphones when she goes shopping in case his songs are playing in stores. The healthcare assistant, from Retford in Nottinghamshire, was diagnosed with epilepsy in 2008, but it wasn't until she kept passing out whenever Ne-Yo's 2011 hit 'Give Me Everything' was played that she realised she was having music-induced fits. The 15-second seizures leave her "staring blankly" and after they pass she will vomit, be very thirsty and feel extremely sleepy.

Surgeons removed part of her left temporal lobe in a six-hour operation in June 2014, but this didn't stop the 'musicogenic seizures', and they fear she will have the condition for life. Ms Fennessy has been unable to work for over six months. She is doubtless hoping that Ne-Yo's star wanes so that his voice vanishes from the airwaves; although other singers might well share his vocal tone and have a similar effect on her. *D.Mirror, Metro, 13 Nov 2014.*

SIDELINES...

DEADLY BANANAS

A family fled their south London home after one of the world's most poisonous and aggressive spiders arrived with a Waitrose delivery. The lethal 6in (15cm) Brazilian wandering spider was hiding in bananas and was sitting on an egg sack pulsing with thousands of babies.

The father of the family dropped the bananas into a fruit bowl, inadvertently trapping the spider's leg. The spider tore off its leg and hid from sight, but was eventually trapped by a pest expert. The traumatised family stayed with friends. *Mail on Sunday, 19 Oct 2014.*

SHOCKING HORSE

Sean Johnson, 19, was arrested for having sex with a stuffed toy horse in the bedding department of a Walmart in Brooksville, Florida. The Tampa teenager was caught on surveillance cameras. *Sun, 16 Oct 2014.*

STUFFED NEIGHBOURS

Scarecrows outnumber people three to one in Nagoro, Japan, where Tsukimi Ayano, 65, uses them to replace neighbours who have died or left. She has life-sized figures, each with its own expression, placed in her home and all over the town. Out of hundreds of families, just 35 living people remain. *MX News (Sydney), 9 Dec 2014.*

BELATED RENAMING

On 25 May the residents of Castrillo Matajudios (Little Fort of Jew Killers) voted to change the name of their Spanish village to Castrillo Motajudios (Little Hill Fort of Jews). The old name dated from the 1492 expulsion of Spain's Jews. It was either invented by Christian converts to discourage further persecution, or resulted from a clerical error, changing mota (hill) to mata (kill). In August the French hamlet of La Mort aux Juifs (Death to the Jews) was also considering a name-change. *Int. NY Times, 12+27 May; Sun, 15 Aug 2014.*

SIDELINES...

EMBELLISHED SIGNS

Somewhere in Skegness, Lincolnshire, we are told there is (or was) a signpost: "To Old Bolingbroke and Mavis Enderby" – to which someone had added in identical lettering: "The gift of a son". Then there's the famous sign in Liverpool: "Mersey Docks & Harbour Board", underneath which had been written: "and little lambs eat ivy". *Shropshire Star, 19 Aug 2014.*

TWO SHOCKS IN ONE MONTH

On 28 August, a woman walking her dog came upon the corpse of Gabriel Kovari, 24, in the graveyard of St Margaret's, Barking, east London. Then, 23 days later, the same woman found another body in the same graveyard – a 21-year-old man not named in the report. Police said both deaths were "unexplained". *Metro, Sun, 26 Sept 2014.*

FRUIT ABUSE

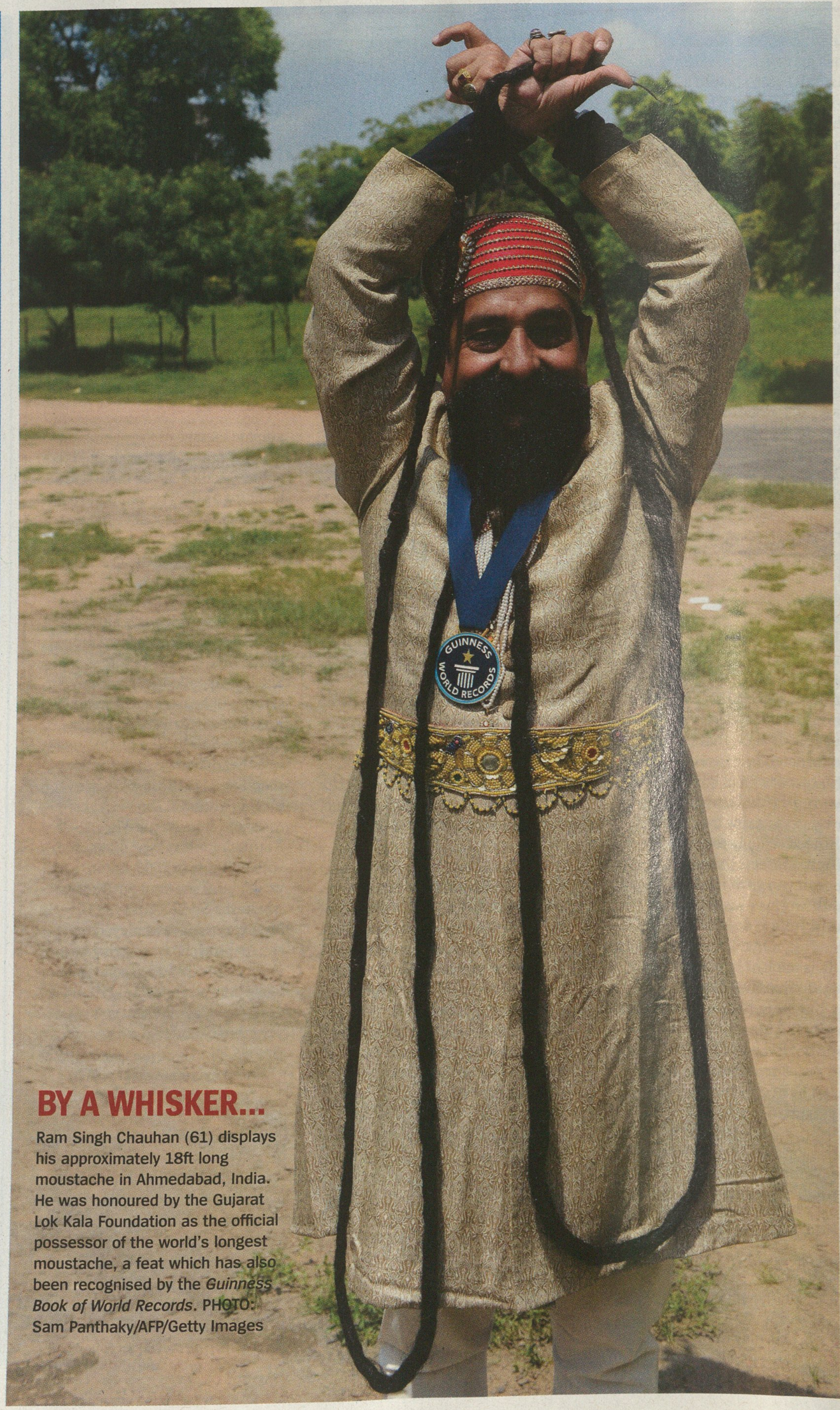
Carmine Cervellino, 49, from Thomaston, Connecticut, faced charges of threatening and disorderly conduct after his wife told police he stabbed a watermelon in a passive-aggressive manner. He was released after posting $500 bail. The couple were in the process of getting a divorce. *Eyewitness News 3, 15 July; irishexaminer.com, 16 July 2014.*

CLEVER PONY

A police hunt for a runaway pony in Cheshire ended when the animal wandered into the police station by itself. *(Sydney) D.Telegraph, 11 Oct 2014.*

LURKING AT KEW

A carnivorous pitcher plant species unknown to science has been discovered growing in a hothouse in London's Kew Gardens. Now named *Nepenthes zygon*, it had been growing there for a decade, helping to kill cockroaches. It was collected as a seed from the Philippines by a plant hunter in 1997 and donated to Kew as a seedling in 2004. *<i> 26 Nov 2014.*



BY A WHISKER...

Ram Singh Chauhan (61) displays his approximately 18ft long moustache in Ahmedabad, India. He was honoured by the Gujarat Lok Kala Foundation as the official possessor of the world's longest moustache, a feat which has also been recognised by the *Guinness Book of World Records*. PHOTO: Sam Panthaky/AFP/Getty Images

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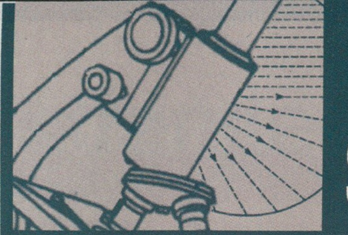
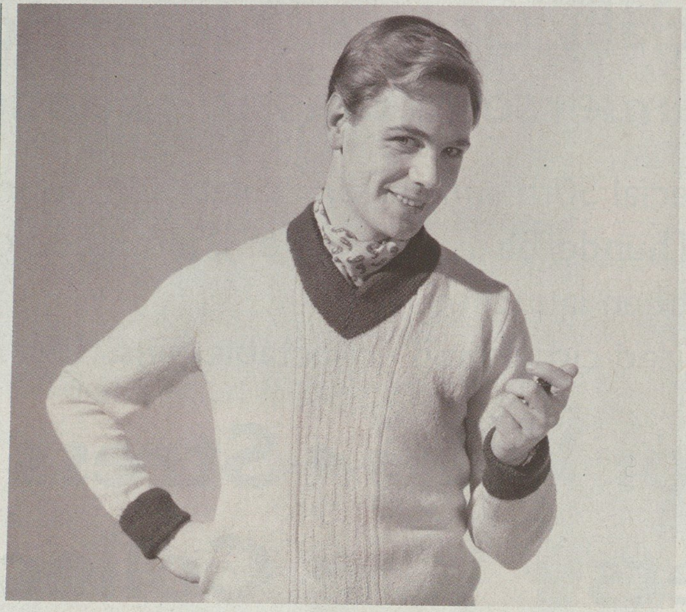


MATT PATTINSON

SCIENCE

ILLUSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

We all believe we're better at things than we really are. **DAVID HAMBLING** suggests that one useful job performed by FT is to remind us of just how much we don't know...



ABOVE: This preening nitwit has a wildly exaggerated idea of his own competence.

Forteans live in a larger world than most. Not only are most other people ignorant of the vast depths of the Universe, they don't even realise that they are ignorant. Any suggestion that there might be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in their philosophy is met with a blank look. It may look like sheer stupidity, but in fact it's the result of deeper forces at play within the human psyche.

It is easy to be critical of others. But first a simple question: assuming you drive, are you a better driver than average? Or, more generally, are you more popular than most of your friends? A 1981 US study found that 93 per cent of drivers thought they were better than average. Similarly, most people believe they are more popular than most of their friends. Both are part of a natural tendency or cognitive bias known as the superiority illusion. Believing that we are better than others is an almost universal aspect of human mental makeup for reasons we will see later.

The superiority illusion underlies the Dunning-Kruger Effect, first described by American psychologist David Dunning in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* in 2011. The basic principle is that the scope of people's own ignorance is invisible to them. The Dunning-Kruger Effect means the world is full of people who are not only incompetent, but also unaware of just how incompetent they are.

Most people are generally happy to concede their ignorance in specialist areas. Not many claim to know much about Sudanese religious art or copper smelting. The problem is that people are also ignorant in more general areas where they would be expected to know something, and have more limited comprehension than they realise. According to the US Institute of Medicine, some 30 per cent of the population have 'substantial difficulty' in understanding basic health information, leading them to take medication erratically or in ways that make it less effective.

The same effect applies to specialist knowledge and even to academic knowledge in one's own discipline. Even psychologists lack insight into whether they are any good at psychology, and are unaware of the gaps in their own knowledge of research methods. Dunning tested this by asking psychology graduate students to find the flaws in four separate studies, and then asked them how well they thought they had done. There was no correlation between their performance and self-scoring; those who found two flaws felt they had done just as well as those who found 10.

Part of the problem is what Dunning terms 'reach-around knowledge,' which resembles the confabulations that amnesiacs unconsciously create to explain things that they can't remember. We use our background knowledge to construct plausible but entirely fictitious 'knowledge'. For example, when asked about Barjolet Cheese, or Yamajitsu stereos, as many of 85 per cent of respondents will be prepared to offer an opinion, even when they are given an option of 'don't know'. (Neither of these actually exists). It's reasonable enough to generalise from what you know, so long as you're aware of doing it. What was surprising was that the less people knew, the more confident they seemed to be in their replies. This applied even when expressing views on non-existing religious groups ('the Wallonians') or philosophies ('esoteric deduction').

Working with Justin Kruger, Dunning further explored this effect by setting tests and asking students how well they thought they did, both in absolute terms and compared with their peers. They found that, across a wide range of different fields, the high performers had a fairly accurate view of their performance, while the lower performers had a wildly exaggerated idea of how well they had done. Most students tend to slightly overestimate their performance, but the effect is more pronounced in the bottom 25 per cent, who typically rate themselves as doing better than average.

The Dunning-Kruger effect applies to skeet-shooters, medical technicians and debating teams. However, it only appears where people think they ought to know something, either generally or in their own specialist area. In each field it is the worst performers who have least insight into their own defects – giving them a double burden, as it makes it much harder for them to correct their mistakes.

Interestingly, there is an exactly parallel effect in the field of intelligence measurement. The Downing Effect describes the tendency for people with a low IQ to judge themselves as being more intelligent than those around them, while those with a high IQ will tend to believe they are less intelligent than their peers.

Why do we constantly fool ourselves into thinking we are more popular, more skilled, more knowledgeable and more intelligent than we really are? The superiority illusion is largely adaptive. It is what allows people to cope with an unknown future. If you underrate yourself, you will not even bother applying for a job. Overrate yourself and you will not only get the job, but will possess the confidence to make it through the difficult starting period until you succeed.

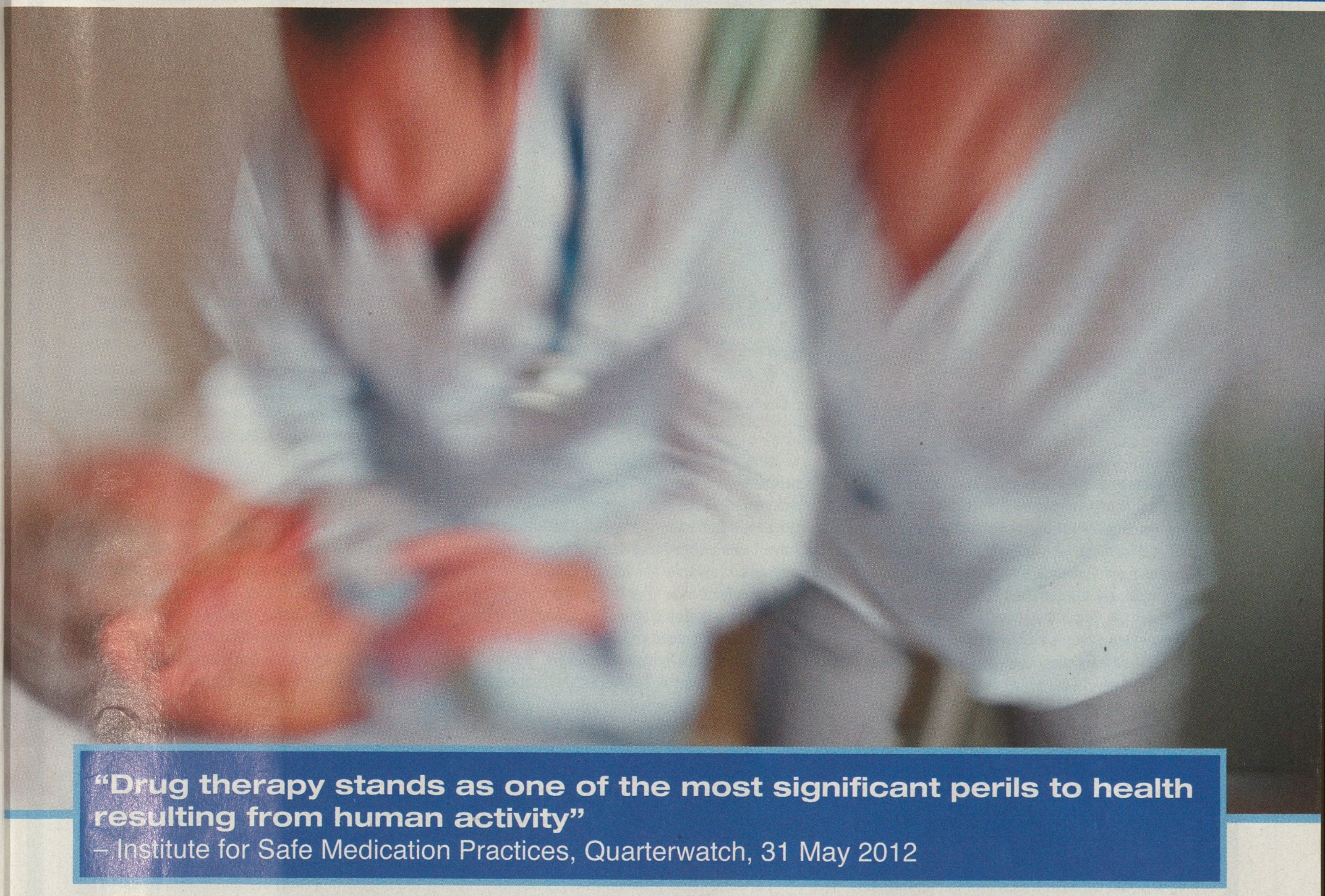
In fact, the flipside of the superiority illusion is what psychologists term 'depressive realism'. While some depressives have a distorted view of reality, others have an accurate view of their own situation and prospects, and it may not be a cheerful one. Some depressives simply lack the comforting illusions that keep their neighbours going.

The superiority illusion has been compared to a pair of crutches: useful to those who need them, but a dangerous encumbrance to those who don't.

In the case of the Dunning-Kruger Effect, Dunning found that an illusory sense of superiority could be dispelled. When, for example, the students who had been looking for experimental flaws were told how many they had missed, they gained a more realistic view. Once poor performers start to become educated, they recognise how badly they were doing before.

This leads to what Dunning calls the paradox of gaining expertise: the more knowledge people gain, the more they are aware of their own ignorance. So Isaac Newton thought he was just a child collecting pebbles of knowledge beside an ocean of undiscovered truth, while many a taxi driver thinks he knows everything.

In this situation, humanity clearly needs to be made more aware just how much of the world there is yet to be explored and understood, and how many things we still do not know. And that, surely, is what *Fortean Times* is for.



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– Institute for Safe Medication Practices, Quarterwatch, 31 May 2012

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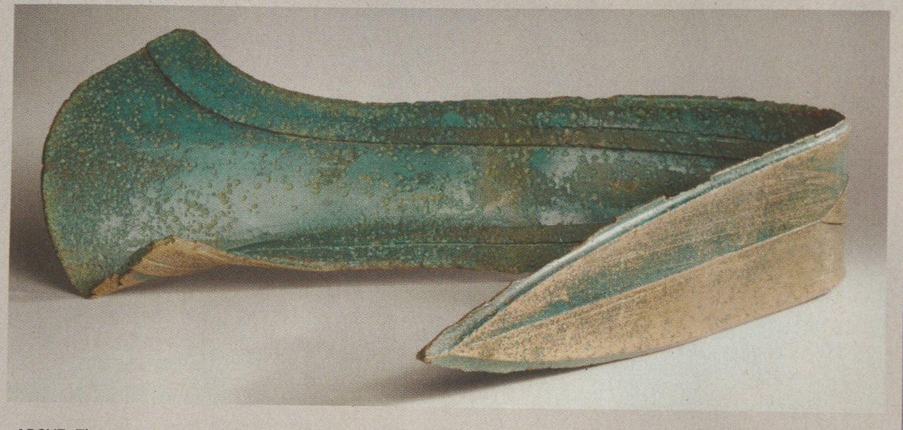
MATT PATTINSON

ARCHÆOLOGY

PAUL SIEVEKING reports on how a giant Bronze Age dagger was rescued from an ignominious second life as a doorstop and the tattoed Siberian ice maiden due to be reinterred after messing with the weather...



NORWICH CASTLE GALLERY

ABOVE: The ceremonial dagger now known as the 'Rudham Dirk' was used for 10 years as a doorstop.

FROM DAGGER TO DOORSTOP

A piece of bronze was ploughed up in a field in East Rudham, Norfolk, in 2002 and used by the landowner for more than a decade as a doorstop. He was considering throwing it into a skip when a friend suggested he should have it examined by an archæologist. Dr Andrew Rogerson, head of Norfolk's Portable Antiquities Scheme, identified it as a giant ceremonial dagger from the Middle Bronze Age (1500-1350 BC), only the sixth of its kind ever found – two in France, two in the Netherlands, and two in the UK. They are so similar in style and execution that it is possible they were all made in the same workshop, perhaps even by the same hand.

The landowner sold the Rudham Dirk, as it is known, to the Norwich Castle Museum for £40,970. Straightened out, the 4.1lb (1.9kg) dirk would be 27in (69cm) long. Its large size, deliberately blunt edges and the lack of rivet holes where a handle would be attached showed it was for ceremonial rather than practical use. It was bent as a symbolic act of destruction before burial – a common practice in the Bronze Age and later.

The other British dagger was discovered in 1988, when a man literally tripped over it while walking through a wood in Oxborough, Norfolk, 20 miles (32km) from East Rudham. It had been thrust vertically into soft peaty ground, but erosion had exposed the hilt-plate, which caught his toe. It is now in the British Museum. *Metro, thehistoryblog.com, 24 Nov; dailymail.co.uk, 26 Nov 2014.*

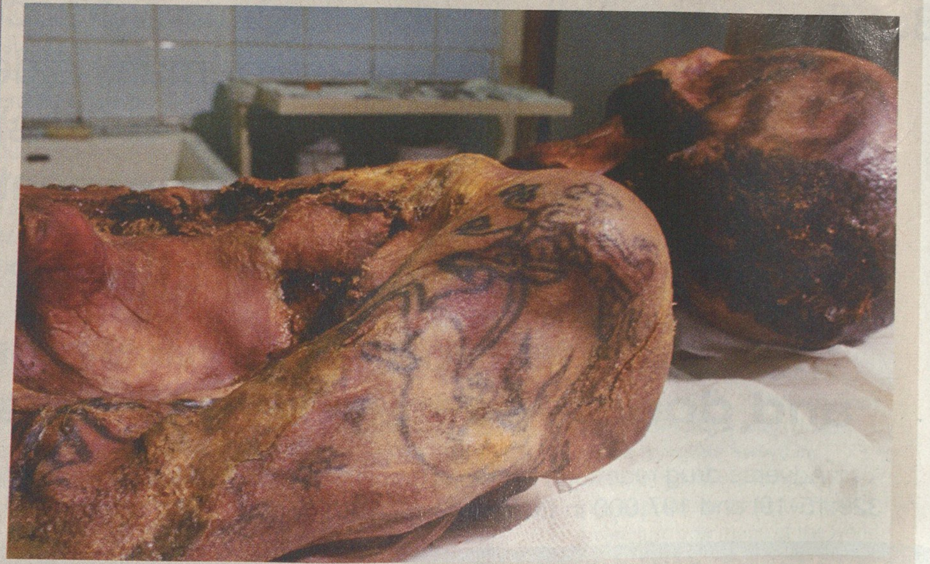
THE ICE MAIDEN'S TATTOOS

A Siberian ice maiden from the Altai mountains is set to be reburied because native groups claim her anger is disrupting the weather. The 25-year-old woman from the Pazyryk culture was found in 1993 in a subterranean burial chamber at an altitude of 2,500m (8,200ft) on the Ukok Plateau in the Autonomous Republic of Altai, close to Russia's frontiers with Mongolia and Kazakhstan. She had been preserved in permafrost since the 5th century BC, and was accompanied by two male warriors and six horses, saddled and bridled. She is thought to have been either a member of a 'royal' family, a revered folk tale narrator, a healer or a holy woman. Tattoos on her left shoulder show a deer with a griffon's beak and a pair of antlers or horns, decorated with the heads of griffons. The same griffon's head is shown on the back of the animal. The mouth of a spotted panther with a long tail is seen with the legs of a sheep. She also has a deer's head on her wrist, and a design on the thumb of her left hand. Next to her body was a meal of mutton and horsemeat, ornaments made from felt, wood, bronze and gold, a small container of cannabis, and burnt coriander seeds on a stone plate.

'Princess Ukok', also known as Ooch-Bala – seen as 'one of the most significant archæological discoveries at the close of the 20th century' – was exhibited in Novosibirsk before being relocated in 2012 to the Republican National Museum in Gorno-Altaisk, the Altai capital, to be closer to her original resting place. Last August, Altai's Council of Elders voted to rebury her, a decision apparently accepted by local governor Alexander Berdnikov. "It is claimed recent flooding in Altai – the worst for 50 years – and a series of earthquakes are the result of ancient anger at the grave being disturbed," reported the *Siberian Times*. The re-burial is likely to require validation by the Russian Ministry of Culture in Moscow, which doesn't seem to have happened at the time of writing. However, a ban has been imposed on further archæological digs in other burial mounds in the remote area where her remains were found. *D.Mail, 14 Aug 2012 + 22 Aug 2014.*

BONY ARMOUR

A settlement site near the Siberian city of Omsk, beside the Irtysh River, has yielded a suit of bony armour believed to be between 3,500 and 3,900 years old. The sheath, found in "perfect condition", is probably made from the bones of elk, deer or horse. It was buried separately from its owner around 5ft (1.5m) below ground. Nearby were artefacts from the Bronze Age Krotov culture of animal breeders, but the armour resembles finds from the Samus-Seyminskaya culture, which originated some 1,000km (620 miles) away before its peoples migrated to the Omsk area. Yury Gerasimov, of the Institute of Archæology and Ethnography in Omsk, is certain it belonged to a hero or 'elite warrior' – but it's a mystery why such a precious object was buried. *D.Mail, 9 Sept; Independent, 11 Sept 2014.*



ABOVE: Tattoos visible on the ice maiden's shoulder include a deer with a griffon's beak and a pair of antlers.

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

184: JE SUIS UN RIGHT CHARLIE

No Prophet-mocking ones, but plenty of classical and Byzantine caricatures that would have run into serious trouble in our censorious times.

JJ Pollitt's *The Art of Rome* (1966) and Cyril Mango's *The Art of the Byzantine Empire* (1972) provide a cornucopia of translated sources. For more detailed accounts, see Jules Champfleury's *Histoire de la Caricature antique* (1867) – pictorial extracts on YouTube, and my essay in *Roman & Byzantine Papers* (1989, pp565-78) – for permission to self-plagiarise, I am grateful to myself.

(According to the OED, the word 'cartoon' first appeared in 1671, to denote 'a drawing on stout paper as a design for painting tapestry, and mosaic;' the modern sense débuted in 1883.)

Pliny (*NH*, bk36 ch12) says Greek poet Hipponax (a notorious mocker of women) countered with mordant epigram the artists Athens and Bupalis who had made pictorial mock of his ugly face, so savage that they committed suicide.

Quintilian (bk6 ch72) describes how Manius Curius faced a courtroom accuser with paintings showing him naked or in prison, the victim of his own excessive gambling.

Appian (*Civil Wars*, bk2 ch101) describes Romans laughing at Cæsar's propaganda pictures of his enemies' flights and deaths. Pliny (bk35 ch117) says one Spurius Tadius (Spurius but genuine) won fame in Augustus's time for his cartoons of men staggering under weighty women on their shoulders "and other witty pictures of that sort".

Less palatable was Parrhasius who bought and tortured a prisoner in order to make his painting of Prometheus more realistic. In rather different vein, he caricatured the athletic Atalanta fellating Mileage, a bit of Greek porno that hung in emperor Tiberius's bedroom (Suetonius, ch44) to help him get it up – Parrhasius would be a natural for *Charlie Hebdo*.

Juvenal (*Satire* 10 vv157-8) alludes to a caricature of the one-eyed Hannibal astride a gigantic elephant – nowadays the artist would be hauled up for 'Punicism'.

The fourth-century historian Eunapius (fr68) got very het up over a prefect who erected in the Circus (whether Rome or Constantinople is unclear) a set of small-panelled pictures depicting – so Eunapius complains – a hand coming out of the clouds, captioned 'The Hand of God Driving Off the Barbarians' and 'The Barbarians Fleeing God'. Evidently religious: Eunapius moans on about this "stupid odious nonsense of the drunken painters – shameful but necessary to write down."

A Byzantine development of this sort of caustic cartoon occurs in the furious account by Niketas Paphlago (*Life of Saint Ignatius*) of the Seven Synodal Acts trumped up against this holy man. They were in colour, in two lavish volumes, the work of bishop Gregory Asbestas (suitably fiery name) of Syracuse, here vilipended as "a painter in addition to his other vices". The pictures were variously captioned, and Niketas splutters with Eunapian rage as he inventories each one – they look like a parody of a martyrdom cycle.

Comic oddities abound in disparate sources. The *Augustan History*'s Life of emperor Tacitus (ch16 paras2-3) claims a quinquiplex portrait (on one panel) excited ridicule by showing him in five sets of incongruous clothes. With this can be juxtaposed historian Niketas Choniates's account (*History*, para431, ed. van Dieten) of emperor Andronicus I in a glamorised farm-labourer's costume.

The eighth-century Byzantine *Brief Historical Notes* (a guide-book to Constantinople's monuments) mentions (ch19) a statue of the hunchback Firmilianus as *pros pelota gegonen* – ambiguous Greek, meaning either 'made for a joke' or 'became one'.

African Latin poet Luxorius (Epigram 33) no doubt reflects both classical and Vandal (he lived under their occupation) taste in his description of a debauchee's coffin covered with scenes from obscene life. His two pictures (poems 26-27) of Fame on circus stables may have comported a humorous touch, Fame being apparently the horse's name – the mane point.

The standard physical attributes of Christian holy men catalogued in Ulpius's *On Bodily Characteristics* are often less than flattering, easily lending themselves to caricature. Indeed, we have a literary testimony to this in the Byzantine satirical dialogue *Philopatris*, which (ch12) mocks the long nose and receding hairline of Saint Paul – for more on all this, with catalogue of physical traits, cf. my essays in *Roman & Byzantine Papers*, pp342-6, and *Studies on Greek & Roman History & Literature* (1985), pp370-93).

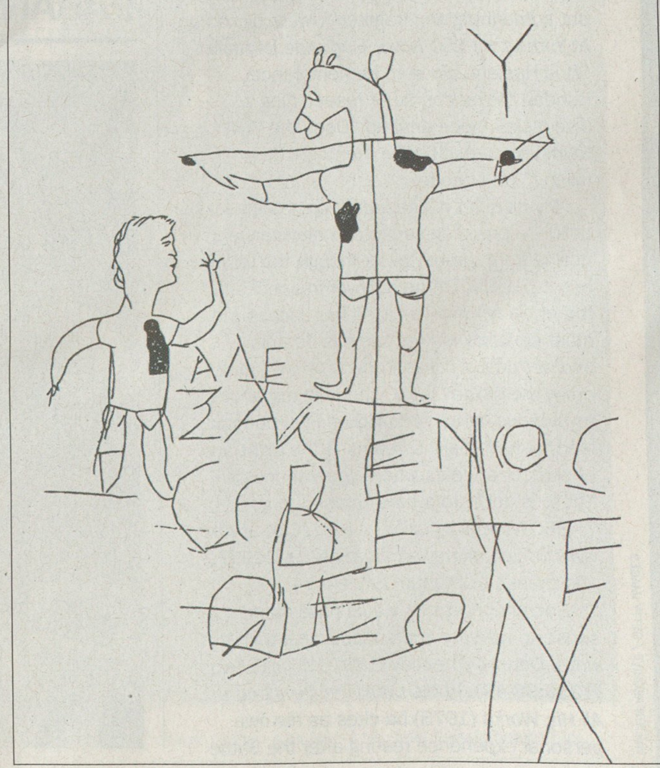
Given its ideological-religious purpose, I have saved the best-known example for last. This is the so-called Alexamenos graffito (pictured below), discovered in 1857, now housed in Rome's Palatine Museum. Mentioned by Christian polemicist Tertullian (*Apology*, ch16 paras 12-3), its exhibitor (variously taken as a Roman soldier, a wild-beast fighter, or renegade Jew) is worshipping a creature with donkey's ears, and one hoofed foot, accompanied by a caption in ungrammatical Greek, "Alexamenos worships his god".

Elsewhere (*To the Nations*, ch1 para14), Tertullian mentions an apostate Jew carrying a caricature around Carthage, showing a similar beast captioned 'The God of the Christians Begotten of a Donkey' – asinine stuff indeed.

There's no particular evidence for Byzantine Christian cartooning of Islam. But, given their relentless polemical insults in both religious and secular literature (e.g. Princess Cassia's viciously racist poem against the Armenians), it is likely enough. Most Byzantines may never have encountered a Muslim off the battlefield, though the 12th-century freelance scholar-poet John Tzetzes boasts that he can greet foreigners in many languages, including Arabic. Not very hard to visualise satirically twisted icons and suchlike.

Byzantine verbal abuse was often scatological, prefiguring the savagery of such 18th-century English cartoonists as Cruikshank, Gilroy, and Rowlandson, who might have made *Charlie Hebdo* blush.

" I Only Had A Picture Of You" – Joe Brown and The Bruvvers



ALAN MURDIE concludes his survey of the ghostly literature of the Great War.

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ABOVE: The French city of Cambrai after heavy German bombardment on 1 September 1914. **BELOW:** Dennis Wheatley believed he was attacked by "an elemental".

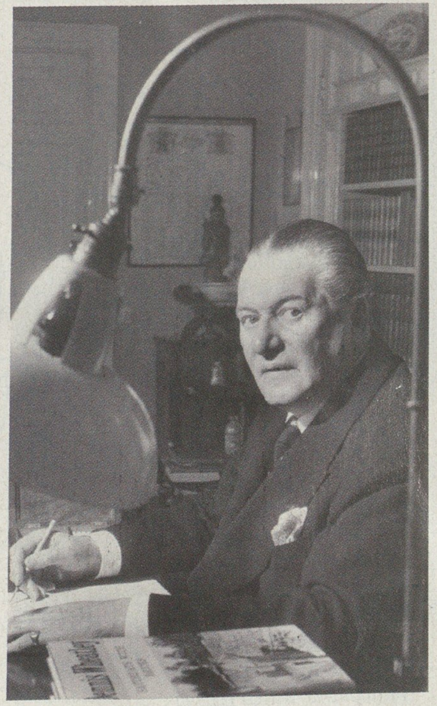
In my last column on the psychic aspects of World War I, I mentioned that relatively few ghost experiences have been reported in Flanders, although I suspected that such accounts await discovery in the vast literature of the conflict. Certainly local guides with whom I spoke in September 2014 had heard no ghost stories, but some intriguing fragments were picked up at Ypres by a BBC *News Magazine* journalist Chris Haslam, close to Remembrance Sunday. In the course of researching a discussion piece entitled "Does the WWI tourist trade exploit the memory of the fallen?" he states:

"My disquiet is caused by something less solid – a brooding sense of malevolence oozing from the earth, as though the violence has a half-life. I'm no believer in spooks but the old lady I meet walking her dachshund most certainly is. Her name is Beatrijs and her dog is called Robert. As we amble down the muddy track, she tells me about mysterious lights seen flickering in no man's land, of half-heard screams in the night and of corners of fields where generations of Robert's ancestors have refused to go."

(BBC *News Magazine*, 9 Nov 2014 at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29930997 and thanks to Graham Wheeldon)

Such impressions would have made sense to novelist and supernatural thriller writer Dennis Wheatley (1897-1977) (See **FT256:38-43**). In his book *The Devil and All His Works* (1973) he cites as his own personal experience resting after the Battle of Cambrai. He and a group of fellow officers commandeered a ruined mansion that had been occupied by the Germans and still contained discarded bloodstained uniforms. As they were intending to stay some months, Wheatley decided to erect a mess himself, laying bricks which had been specially cleaned by his soldier servant. Conditions meant Wheatley had to work alone after dark, until one night he was suddenly overwhelmed by total panic and fled the scene of his building project. He wrote, "I am convinced I was attacked by an elemental".

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL PRESSURES MAY HAVE BEEN AT WORK RATHER THAN PARANORMAL ONES



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However, here psychological and social pressures may have been at work rather than paranormal ones, with this being a personal rationalisation of a sudden collapse of nerves. Officers suffered war neurosis more frequently than the lower ranks, from having to suppress their own emotions as an example for their men. Dubbed "shell shock", it would not have been good form to admit such a nervous collapse, since it was often diagnosed as a form of hysteria, then considered a predominantly female complaint. For Wheatley, so soon after being in battle, the experience of being alone under the Moon in a war-ravaged landscape might have triggered the release of pent-up fear and trauma. However, rather than admit this, it may have been much preferable to blame an external entity, one of the 'elementals' which featured frequently from 1934 onwards in his series of black magic novels and in which Wheatley readily believed.

Indeed, the fear that reporting a paranormal experience might be interpreted as a symptom of mental imbalance may be a factor in explaining why relatively few ghostly experiences were recorded by servicemen at the time. Such concerns certainly appear in some accounts.

For example, an unnamed seaman wrote to the *Daily News* of an experience serving aboard a vessel in the Great War. "One dark night, when I was keeping watch on deck as quartermaster, and pacing to and fro, I was suddenly amazed to see in front of me what appeared to be a form of a man." The figure was only visible for a few seconds but the writer admitted suffering "quite a shock". The writer began to wonder "if I had lost my nerves" and told shipmates who were sceptical, and sought to convince him that he "wasn't all there". However, their discussions were interrupted by the arrival of a message that one of the stewards had died in his cabin during the night. "I can't say it was his ghost I saw, but the coincidence was a strange one". (In *Warnings From the Beyond*, 1927, issued by the *Daily News*).

Ghostly experiences were certainly reported by many non-combatants and people far removed from the scene of any fighting. Accounts came from relatives, frequently women who lost husbands, sons, brothers and fiancés. Experiences ranged from seeing a lifelike apparition (or apparitions) to waking premonitions or simply unaccountable feelings of pain or unease, arising not only when a serving relative was killed, wounded or in danger.

Harold Owen recalled going down to his cabin in a ship off the Cameroons in 1918 and seeing his soldier brother Wilfred Owen, the war poet, dressed in khaki and sitting in his chair. When he asked, "'Wilfred how did you get here?'...his whole face broke into his sweetest and most endearing dark smile". The apparition did not speak and continued smiling until Harold looked away momentarily. When he looked back the chair was empty. Falling into deep sleep soon after, on waking Harold Owen knew with absolute certainty his brother was dead; in fact he had been killed on the Western Front several weeks before. (Source: *The Oxford Book of the Supernatural*, 1993, citing vol.III *Journey From Obscurity*, 1965, by Harold Owen.)

But in other cases the witness was not an immediate relative or loved one, as with a young woman who volunteered for war work and was taken on at the army camp at Wigston in Leicestershire as a typist, to free up a young soldier named Tyers for active service. One night, six months later in her bedroom, the woman saw and recognised the phantom of Tyers searching a drawer. On arriving at camp the next morning, she was present when Tyers's father telephoned her office to tell them his son had died of wounds the previous night in hospital. (*Ghosts of the Great War*, 1927, by S Louis Giraud).

The recent biography *Airborne* (2013) of pioneer broadcaster Lance Sieveking records how he paid a surprise visit to the family home in Hastings on leave from the Royal Naval Air Service in 1917. After being greeted warmly by his mother ('Mivey'), "... she looked beyond me and towards the front door and said, 'But where's your friend gone?' I replied that there was no one with me, but Mivey insisted that when she had opened the door there had been another youth in naval uniform standing beside me." From her description the figure coincided with a friend who had been killed just the previous day.

Whilst many such experiences seemed wholly private and personal, some gifted psychics and clairvoyants seemed to be picking up wider predictions and intimations of World War II, which seemed quite meaningless at the time. On 31 January 1915 references to "the Munich Bond – you will see strange things" appeared in the trance script written by Dame Edith Lyttleton together with a warning of "fear of the price of peace". On 24 May 1915 she produced another trance script referring to "the hand stretched out to stay Bechtesgaden".

Andrew Mackenzie, who examined the surviving scripts in the early 1970s, wondered if these references were presentiments of the run-up to World War II, referring to Neville Chamberlain's negotiations with Hitler in 1938 leading to the Munich Treaty, and a misspelling of *Berchtesgaden* (the site of Hitler's favourite mountain residence). Interestingly, Dame Edith was later a delegate to the League of Nations created following the end of World War I. (*The Riddle of the Future*, 1974, by Andrew MacKenzie).

A similar story of presentiment of events in the next war also involving Lance Sieveking emerged from his visit to a house at 83 Gunterstone Road in London accompanied by a clairvoyant who spontaneously declared

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ABOVE LEFT: Wilfred Owen appeared to his brother Harold soon after his death. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Lance Sieveking, whose mother saw one of his dead friends beside him.

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ABOVE LEFT: The house on Gunterstone Road used as a secret office by Montgomery. **ABOVE:** The Old Vicarage, Grantchester. **LEFT:** Rupert Brooke died in Greece in 1915 but was believed to have manifested at the house four years later in 1919.

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THE SPIRIT OF RUPERT BROOKE WAS BELIEVED TO HAVE MANIFESTED FOUR YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH IN 1915

that the property would be very important for the history the world. This seemed ludicrous at the time, but 30 years later in 1945 Sieveking learned the nondescript house concealed a secret office used by General Montgomery for planning the D-Day invasion.

Ghostly revenants from World War I continued to be reported following the Armistice. A correspondent to the *Daily News* in 1927 told how after demobilisation in February 1919 he was staying with friends in Blackpool when "during the night I wakened very abruptly with the strong feeling that someone was standing at the bedside." His eyes "caught a momentary glimpse of a dark form and, at the same instant, there flashed into my brain the name 'Harold'".

The writer recalled a pact made with Harold W—— four years earlier at Great Weeton Camp, that whoever should die first should return and demonstrate his survival in spirit. Amid "the kaleidoscopic turmoil" of war, the writer had forgotten their mutual pledge. His, friend had been killed on 9 October 1918, whilst stretcher-bearing near Cambrai, and despite scepticism from friends the writer considered his experience proved the return of his friend. (Included in *Warnings From Beyond*, 1927).

The spirit of poet Rupert Brooke, who charmed and captured imaginations of Britain's establishment before his death from an infected mosquito or spider bite near Skyros, Greece, on St George's Day 1915, was believed by some to have manifested at the Old Vicarage at Granchester, Cambridgeshire, four years later in 1919. However, whilst not denying a haunting, a later occupier, Olympic sportsman Peter Ward, claimed this was not Brooke but the ghost of an earlier resident. (See *Cambridge Ghosts*, 2010, by Robert Halliday and Alan Murdie).

Perhaps the best ghost story linked to the 'War to End All Wars' was that told by Lieutenant-Colonel The O'Doneven of Lymington, Hampshire, who, as an officer in the Second World War, played a game of billiards with the spirit of a soldier from the First World War. This unique game is mentioned in the *Reader's Digest* collection *Folklore, Myths and Legends* (1973). O'Doneven claimed how in 1943 he had been billeted with other officers in a lovely old mansion house in the Midlands. All the fixtures and furniture had been covered over for the duration of the war, but the house retained a family butler who was engaged for the officers to serve them a "frugal dinner" each evening at 7.45pm. One evening O' Doneven went down an hour early, and clearly "heard the sound of billiard balls being clicked about".

Pushing open the door he found himself in a longish room with a billiard table at which stood a "humpbacked" young man dressed in Kitchener Army Blues of World War I. O'Doneven invited him to a game, and though the young man made no reply, they commenced playing. At the point they were at 98 all, O'Doneven heard other officers arriving. Taking his shot, either "a sure pot at his ball or the gentlemanly cannon shot off red to white" O'Doneven saw the young soldier put his cue back in the rack with a smile, and observed him quietly walk through another door, "into what I afterwards discovered was a bathroom."

Later over dinner, the Lieutenant Colonel casually asked, "Any of you seen the little chap in Blues?" None of the officers had and he was just on the point of dropping the matter when he added, "A nice lad with a hump. I've just beaten him at billiards."

At his words the old butler, on the point of serving an apple tart froze. Turning pale, he declared: "You've seen Master Willie, sir."

The butler explained that Master Willie had been her Ladyship's brother, who had joined Kitchener's Army in 1915 but was dismissed on discovering he was deformed. He returned at Christmas 1916 and had shot himself in the room where he loved to play billiards.

Unfortunately, one might be naturally suspicious of such an interactive phantom able to play billiards; nor is confidence inspired by the fact the mansion is unnamed and the story letter appeared in *Soldier* magazine for March 1961, following a Christmas appeal for ghost stories with financial prizes offered for the best contributions.

However, writer Dennis Bardens who later interviewed the Lieutenant Colonel for his book *Ghosts and Hauntings* (1965) considered the story might be genuine; O' Donoven claiming the experience throughout had all seemed entirely natural at the time, and that a few nights later, two subalterns coming down the stairs also spotted the small figure walking away from the fire.

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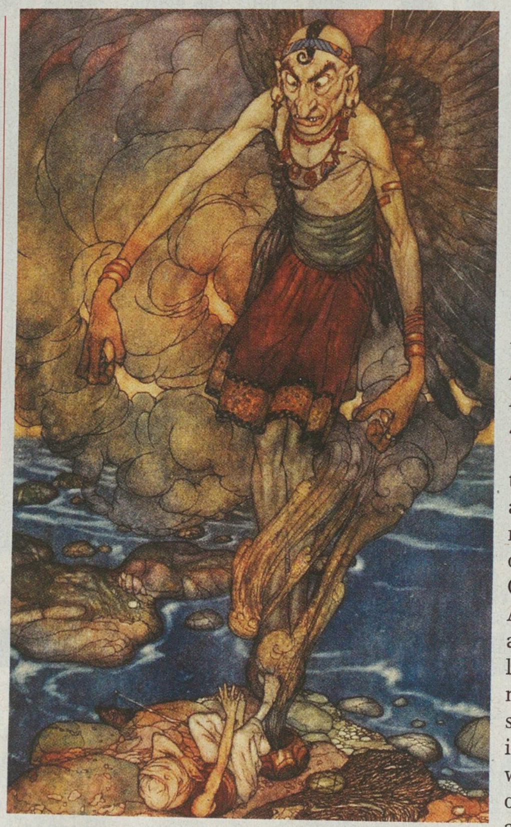
DJINN ON THE INCREASE?

No one agrees what they are, but the eastern entities still flourish...



LEFT: A 1907 illustration of a djinni by Edmund Dulac.

In different cultures, phenomena such as a spate of inexplicable fires or volleys of stones thrown by invisible forces are laid at he door a variety of 'extra-dimensional denizens' (EDDs). In the West, poltergeists often get the blame; in southern Africa, the tokoloshe; and in the Muslim world the djinn or jinn (singular: djinni/jinni).

In the last decade, as the social fabric in Iraq has unravelled, belief in djinn has increased dramatically; they are often invoked to explain various maladies, including 'demonic' possession. TV channels show programmes presented by people claiming that they can heal the possessed by means of magic, while religious and political parties employ magic and sorcery to manipulate the electorate. Sheikh Abdel Wahab al-Khalasi works at a mosque in Erbil (in Kurdish Iraq), exorcising djinn from human bodies with the help of the Qur'an. He speaks confidently about his ability to talk to djinn and order them to leave a sick person's body or else they will die.

In May 2014, Iraq's Al-Diyar channel showed a long documentary titled "Magic in Cemeteries", depicting how magicians bury talismans among graves to cause harm. On 7 November, Alforat TV broadcast a report about a village near the city of Kut, where inhabitants claimed that djinn were attacking it and burning its houses. The report showed people running, startled because of the smoke rising from their houses, and shouting that it was the djinn's doing.

In December 2013, journalist Abdel Jabbar al-Itabi reported stories of Iraqi athletes and coaches who practise magic and sorcery on Iraqi football fields. For instance, sometimes a player pees on the ball before the game starts or casts spells on the opponent's goal. In February 2014, the news about investigators finding talismans and magic tools inside the Iraqi parliament went viral. Investigations showed that they were provided at the request of female parliamentary workers.

Iraqi magicians and charlatans are raking it in and the prices of animals and birds used for magical purposes are rocketing. In June 2013 a snake hunter said that a specific type of snake cost £660. In May 2011 the price of a hyena, whose genitals are used in magic, was reported to be up to £400, while a wolf cost £1,300, as its teeth and liver are used in magical workings. *www.al-monitor.com, 5 Jan 2015.*

Meanwhile in Dubai, landlords seeking compensation for house fires have sometimes told police the blaze was started by djinn. A police fire expert poured scorn on the idea, saying that investigations suggested the fires were often either started deliberately or caused by negligence. In 2014, a man in Dubai was granted a divorce after he said his wife was possessed by a djinni and refused to have sex with him. A court initially awarded the woman alimony but this was cancelled by an appeals court, which said she should have been "honest" about the djinn issue. *Khaleej Times, via BBC News, 7 Jan 2015.*

The Bible holds that God created angels and then made man in His own image. The Qur'an states that Allah fashioned angels from light and then made djinn from smokeless fire. As in the Bible, man was formed later, out of clay. Djinn are mentioned 37 times in the Qur'an, and have a *sura* (chapter) devoted to them. Djinn disappointed Allah, not least by climbing to the highest celestial vaults and eavesdropping on the angels – but He did not annihilate them. Like mankind, djinn were created to worship Allah and were preserved on Earth for that purpose, living in a parallel world, set at such an angle that djinn can see man, but men cannot see djinn – under normal circumstances, anyway. Some people are blessed (or cursed) with an ability to see and interact with djinn, just as others see and interact with creatures from the world of faery.

Although a few Islamic scholars over the centuries have denied the existence of djinn, the consensus is that good Muslims should believe in them. Some Islamic jurists consider marriage between djinn and humans to be lawful, and there is a similar provision for the inheritance of djinn property. Sex during menstruation is an invitation to djinn and can result in a woman bearing a djinn child. According to the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad preached to bands of djinn, and some converted to Islam. Unbelieving djinn are shaytan (demons), "firewood for hell". Many Muslims see the Devil – and the snake in the Garden of Eden – as a djinni. Some Afghanis hold that mujahideen, "two-legged wolves", scared the djinn into the world (or rather the world of humans), causing disharmony. It is djinn, they say, who whisper into the ears of suicide bombers.

An unnamed columnist in the *Economist* (23 Dec 2006) wrote: "In Somalia and Afghanistan clerics matter-of-factly described to your correspondent the range of jinn they had encountered, from the saintly to the demonic; those that can fly, those that crawl, plodding jinn, invisible jinn, gul with vampiric tendencies (from which the English word ghoul is taken), and shape shifters recognisable in human form because their feet are turned backwards. Occasionally the clerics fell into a trance. Afterwards they claimed their apparently bare rooms had filled with jinn seeking favours or release from amulet charms."

"[..] Women are supposed to be more open to jinn, particularly illiterate rural women: by some accounts education is a noise, a roaring of thought, which jinn cannot bear. Sometimes women turn supposed jinn possession to their own advantage and become fortune tellers." On the other hand, it is allegedly very insulting in Arabic to call anyone *majnoon* ("possessed by djinn") – that is, "mad".

Islam teaches that djinn resemble men in many ways: they have free will, die, face judgment and join sinful humans in hell. They marry, have children, eat, pray, sleep and husband their own animals. Scholars disagree over whether djinn are physical or insubstantial. Some clerics have described them as bestial, giant, hideous, hairy, and ursine. Supposed yeti sightings in Pakistan's Chitral are believed by locals to be of djinn. These kinds of djinn can be killed with date or plum stones fired from a sling.

To more scholarly clerics, djinn are little more than energy, a pulse form of quantum physics perhaps, alive at the margins of sleep or madness, and more often in the whispering of a single unwelcome thought. An extension of this viewpoint is that djinn are not beings at all but thoughts that were in the world before the existence of humanity. Djinn reflect the sensibilities of those imagining them, just as in Assyrian times they were taken to be the spirits responsible for manias, which melted into the light of dawn.

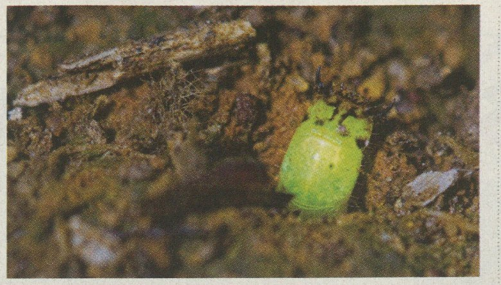
European culture is hardly familiar with djinn; the *Arabian Nights* (or *One Thousand and One Nights*) are about as far as general knowledge goes. In translation, they made a great impression on British culture in the 19th century; Cardinal Newman was not alone, as an imaginative child, when he "used to wish the *Arabian Nights* were true." So the most famous djinni in the Western world is the Genie of the Lamp in the story of Aladdin. The tale had been incorporated into *Arabian Nights* in 1709 by its French redactor, Antoine Galland, in a version he had heard from a Syrian from Aleppo, a Maronite (a Catholic Christian of a Syriac rite).

King Solomon was said to have had control over djinn and used them as masons in building the temple in Jerusalem. Indeed, the Jewish influence over djinn is strong. It is probably no coincidence that the inscription on Aladdin's lamp, which bound the djinni, was engraved with Hebraic characters. Believers in alien abduction like to think djinn are aliens, while some of the more confrontational Muslim clerics dismiss claimed apparitions of the Virgin Mary as the work of djinn. *Economist, 23 Dec 2006; D.Telegraph, 22 June 2013.*

See also 'Djinn & tonic' by Peter Coleman [**FT147:30-33**]; 'Pyro-poltergeists' by Paul Cropper & Tony Healy [**FT281:40-44**]; 'Searching for spirits' by Alan Murdie [**FT291:16-17**]; **FT138:17, 268:8.**

A^Z ALIEN ZOO

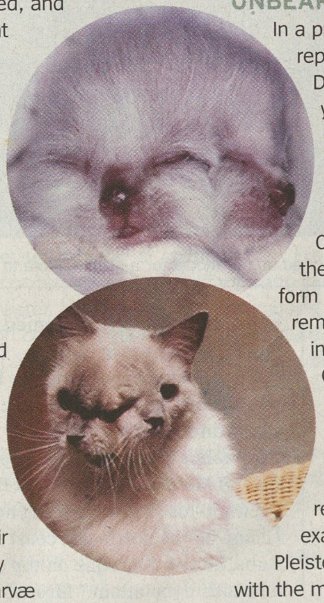
KARL SHUKER presents his regular round-up from the crypto-zoological garden



JEFF CREMER

GLOWING MYSTERY LARVÆ

In 2012, wildlife photographer Jeff Cremer was taking a night hike along a trail in the rainforest of Tambopata, Peru, when he noticed some glowing green dots embedded in a dirt wall. Curious to know what they were, he snapped some close-up photos and posted them on the Reddit website. When Florida University entomologist Dr Aaron Pomerantz saw them, he realised that they depicted some form of bioluminescent insect larva. In October 2014, Pomerantz accompanied Cremer back to the wall, where more photos were snapped, and some specimens of the larvæ brought back by Pomerantz to his laboratory. He witnessed these worm-like forms sticking their brightly-glowing heads out of tiny tunnels in the dirt wall with their huge mandible jawparts fully extended, and suspected that their behaviour was an example of ambush predation, the larvæ attracting potential prey with their glowing heads and then seizing them when they came within reach of their mighty mandibles. This was confirmed by showing that anything touching or approaching their mandibles was immediately grabbed by the larvæ and pulled down inside their tunnels. Pomerantz considered that the larvæ probably belonged to the click beetle family, Elateridæ, but their precise taxonomic identity is currently undetermined. Glowing click beetle larvæ normally live in tunnels within the outermost layers of termite mounds or ant hills, not in dry walls. *http://blog.perunature.com/2014/11/uncovering-glowing-mystery-at-refugio.html*



BOTH PHOTOS: MARTY STEVENS

RECORD-BREAKING JANUS CAT

I coined the officially recognised term 'Janus cat' over a decade ago, after Janus, the double-faced Roman god of doorways, to refer to any domestic cat exhibiting diprosopia. This is a developmental abnormality in which the cat's face is duplicated due to over-production of a specific protein during embryogeny. Normally the deformity is too severe for such an animal to survive for more than just a few days, but there was one record-breaking Janus cat that was an astonishing, world-famous exception to this rule. Born in September 1999, he was a kitten of the ragdoll breed, and was brought into an American veterinary surgery shortly after his birth in order to be euthanised. However, Marty Stevens, a nurse working in the vet's operating theatre, took him home in a bid to rear him. Despite massive odds, she succeeded, with Frank and Louie, as she named him, maturing into a very sturdy adult (the only adult Janus cat ever recorded).

In September 2011, then aged 12, Frank and Louie became an official world record-holder when he was named in *Guinness World Records* as the world's longest-surviving Janus cat. In December 2014, however, I was very sad to learn from Marty that the feline prodigy was dead. He had fallen ill a few days earlier, and after being diagnosed by vets as suffering from a severe cancer he had been euthanised on 4 December to prevent him from suffering from what would soon be its traumatic effects. He was 15 years old, an incredible age for a Janus cat, far surpassing all previous examples and likely never to be matched – a wonderful testament to the love and devotion that Marty gave him throughout his long, happy, and healthy life with her. Rest in peace, Frank and Louie. *www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2014/12/worlds-longest-surviving-janus-cat-passes-away-62152/*

UNBEARABLE MYSTERY?

In a previous Alien Zoo [**FT320:21**], I reported how ribosomal mitochondrial DNA extracted from two alleged yeti hairs obtained in two widely separate locations in the Himalayas (Ladakh and Bhutan) had been shown by a research team headed by geneticist Prof Bryan Sykes of Oxford University to be identical to the DNA of a long-extinct Pleistocene form of polar bear – certainly a very remarkable finding. Now, however, an independent research team featuring Copenhagen University geneticist Dr Ross Barnett has re-analysed these two anomalous hairs, and has found an error in the previous examination, revealing that their respective DNA actually provides an exact correspondence not with the Pleistocene form of polar bear but rather with the modern-day version – a discovery whose validity has been accepted by the earlier team. Nevertheless, one major mystery remains unanswered – how can the presence of modern-day polar bear hairs in two totally discrete Himalayan localities be explained? Could it be that these two hairs were not of Himalayan origin at all, but had somehow been mislabelled as such prior to their examination by the two research teams? Or might it actually be possible that, hitherto unsuspected by science, modern-day polar bears really do survive amid these central Asian mountain peaks, their white coats no doubt providing them with excellent camouflage if or when they ever venture forth into the vast snow fields? (Worth noting, incidentally, is that the Pleistocene polar bear did inhabit the Himalayas prior to its extinction.) Both options seem highly unlikely to say the least, but the indisputable fact remains that these two mystifying hairs do exist and both of them are of modern-day polar bear origin. *http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/282/1800/20141712; http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/282/1800/20142434*

DID MUSLIMS DISCOVER AMERICA?

ABOVE: Istanbul's Ortaköy Mosque, proposed as the model for a new mosque to be built in Cuba. **BELOW:** President Erdogan.

AFP / GETTY IMAGES

The Americas were discovered not by Christopher Columbus but by Muslims, according to Turkey's head of state. Speaking at a summit of Muslim leaders from Latin America in Istanbul, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [pronounced 'Erdowaan'] claimed that "the religion of Islam was widespread" in the New World when the Italian explorer made landfall in the Caribbean in 1492. Erdogan cited as "proof" a diary entry by Columbus in which he supposedly noted a mosque on a Cuban mountaintop. "Muslim sailors had arrived on the shores of America in 1178," he told delegates in a televised speech on 15 November. He expressed his hope of building a mosque on the site. "I would like to talk about it to my Cuban brothers," he said. "A mosque would go perfectly on the hill today." In April 2014, a Turkish delegation had travelled to Havana in an attempt to persuade the Cuban government to allow them to build a huge mosque at the site supposedly referred to by Columbus so that Cuba's 9,000-strong Muslim population has somewhere to worship. The request was apparently denied, but Erdogan lives in hope.

The mosque hypothesis was first put forward by Youssef Mroueh, who wrote in a 1996 article: "Columbus admitted in his papers that on Monday, October 21, 1492 CE while his ship was sailing near Gibara on the north-east coast of Cuba, he saw a mosque on top of a beautiful mountain." Mroueh speculated that explorers from Muslim kingdoms in West Africa had crossed the Atlantic from the Canary Islands. Mroueh is an academic affiliated with the As-Sunnah Foundation of America; he is not listed as an historian at any institution of higher learning. Historians say he was quoting from historian Bartholome de Casas writing decades later and that the dates are confused.

Columbus's actual journal entry for 29 October reads: "Remarking on the position of the river and port, to which he gave the name of San Salvador, he describes its mountains as lofty and beautiful, like the Peña de las Enamoradas, and one of them has another little hill on its summit, like a graceful mosque." In other words, the hill was a *simulacrum* of a mosque. No evidence of pre-Columbian Islamic structures has been discovered in the Americas.

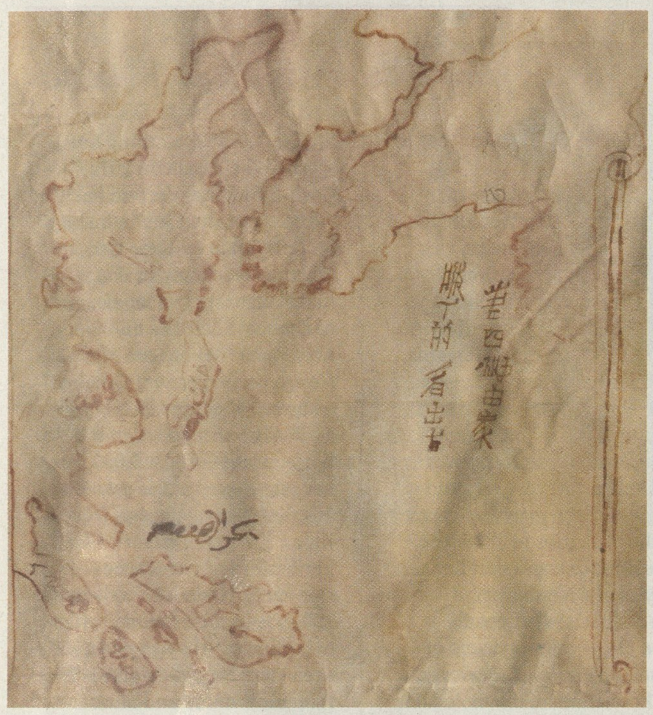
> "A mosque would go perfectly on the hill today"

The first Europeans to set foot in the Americas are currently thought to have been Norsemen led by Leif Eriksson in about AD 1000; but there is all sorts of speculation of other peoples in other eras finding the Americas. Did Polynesians rowing catamarans make it to the American Pacific coast? What about the great treasure fleets of the Chinese Ming emperor? Or Basque fishermen, chasing streams of Atlantic cod? Or the Babylonians, Greeks, Irish, Welsh, Phoenicians, Uncle Tom Cobley and all? [See "What New World?" **FT61:24-28**].

The Spanish exploration of the Americas followed the bloody battles of the *Reconquista* – the Catholic campaigns against the last Muslim states on the Iberian Peninsula. Many of the Spanish soldiers and officers who crossed the Atlantic were animated by the zeal of the Spanish Inquisition, and in some accounts refer to the indigenous populations they encounter as "moors" and "infidels" and their ziggurats as "mosques". The profusion of towns in Mexico called "Matamoros" – death to the Moors, a name associated with a mythic Christian saint who battled Muslims – speaks of that legacy.

In his speech, Erdogan lambasted the European colonisation of the Americas, likening it to the recent Western interventions in the Middle East: "Those who colonised America for its gold and Africa for its diamonds now use the same dirty scheme in the Middle East for its oil." *Washington Post, 15+20 Nov; Newsweek, 16 Nov; Times, 17 Nov 2014.*

● A fresh analysis of 14 parchments has prompted speculation that Marco Polo could have set foot in Alaska during his 24-year odyssey through Asia (1271-1295). The sheepskin documents belonged to Marcian Rossi, an Italian migrant who arrived in America in 1887 and worked as a tailor in San Jose, California. Now in the care of Rossi's great grandson in Texas, they include an account said to have been written by Polo's daughter Bellela, that describes how Polo met a Syrian trader on Siberia's Kamchatka peninsula and sailed across what later became known as the Bering Strait to Alaska. There he came across a land where natives were clad in sealskins and lived on fish in homes "under the earth". A map, donated by Rossi to the Library of Congress in the 1930s, shows a sketch of a Venetian sailing vessel and what appear to be outlines of Japan, Kamchatka Peninsula, the Bering Strait, the Aleutian Islands, and the coastlines of Alaska and British Columbia.



ABOVE: A detail of the Rossi map, showing what appear to be Japan, Kamchatka, the Bering Strait, the Aleutians and the coastlines of Alaska and British Columbia.

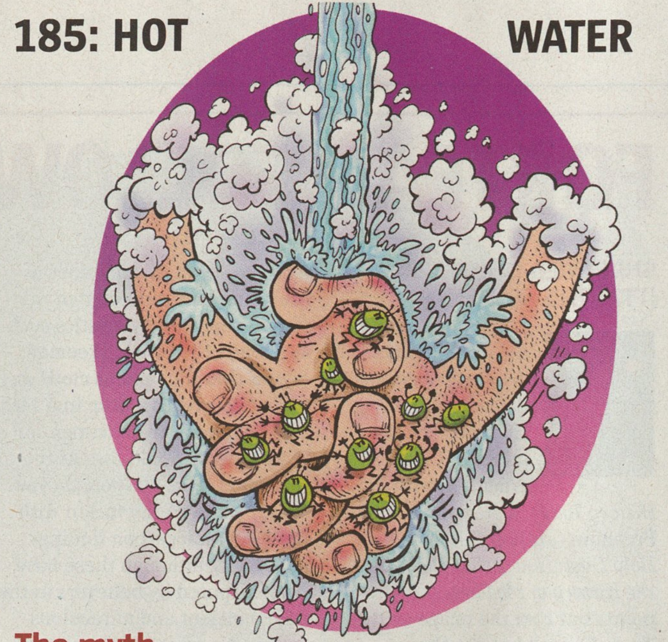
Some of the Rossi documents are signed by Polo's daughters, Fantina, Bellela and Moreta, who said the accounts were based on letters they received from their father. While Polo's celebrated *Description of the World* says nothing of lands beyond Asia, the Venetian explorer did once boast: "I did not tell half of what I saw". A radiocarbon test on the map apparently showing Alaska suggests it dates back to the 15th or 16th centuries, which means – at best – that it is a copy of an original document. Benjamin B Olshin, a professor at Philadelphia's University of the Arts, has spent over a decade contextualising the Rossi documents and translating their Italian, Latin, Arabic and Chinese inscriptions, and has presented the results in *The Mysteries of the Marco Polo Maps* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014). *D.Telegraph, 27 Sept; history.com, 30 Sept 2014.*

Frances Wood, head of the Chinese section at the British Library, cast doubt on Polo's travel narrative in her 1995 book *Did Marco Polo Go To China?* – suggesting the merchant never got further than the Black Sea and probably cobbled together his work from various, now lost, travel narratives by Persian merchants and others [**FT281:10**]; but Ulrich Vogel, Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Tübingen, argues convincingly – in his book *Marco Polo Was In China: New Evidence From Currencies, Salts and Revenues* (Brill Verlag, 2012) – that Polo did indeed travel in China [**FT291:24**].

Mythconceptions

by Mat Coward

185: HOT WATER



HUNT EMERSON

The myth

The water you wash your hands in should be as hot as you can bear it.

The "truth"

The temperature of hand-washing water makes no hygienic difference – or rather, if it were hot enough to make a difference, it would be so hot as to burn your skin. For instance, to kill E.coli germs by temperature alone you'd need water that was above 55°C (130°F), and you'd have to use it for more than 10 minutes. But after just 30 seconds, you'd be suffering second-degree burns. Of course, warm water is better at shifting things like oil, but as far as germs are concerned, neither hot nor warm water shows any benefit over cold water. It's the soap and the rubbing that count. The only consideration in choosing your water temperature should be comfort – and, of course, economy, since hot water costs more in money and fuel.

Sources

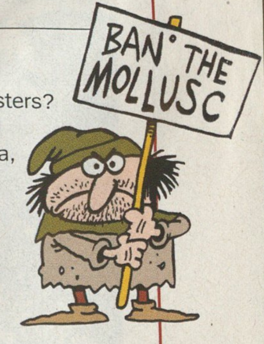
http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/minding-the-body/201301/handwashing-myth-has-environmental-costs; http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2009-11-02/health/sfl-hand-washing-101209_1_hot-water-washing-antibacterial; http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2010/09/23/3020122.htm

Disclaimer

The Disclaimer is the part of this column where we at FT ritually wash our hands of any suggestion that our "Truth" is either final or complete. If you have information to confirm, deny, or enlarge on this matter please send it to the letters page.

Mythchaser

Has anyone ever gone on strike for the right not to eat oysters? Or, indeed, lobster or salmon? The story is commonly told about various places in the British Isles and North America, and is usually set in the 18th or early 19th centuries. It always seems to involve seafood of some kind. A group of poor, low-status workers, such as servants, gets fed up with their employers constantly feeding them on what is now a luxury food, but was then (or so the ironic tale tells us) the cheapest, most despised grub going. But, folklore and local anecdote aside, is there a properly authenticated example of this anywhere in the records? And are the assumptions behind it even true?



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FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

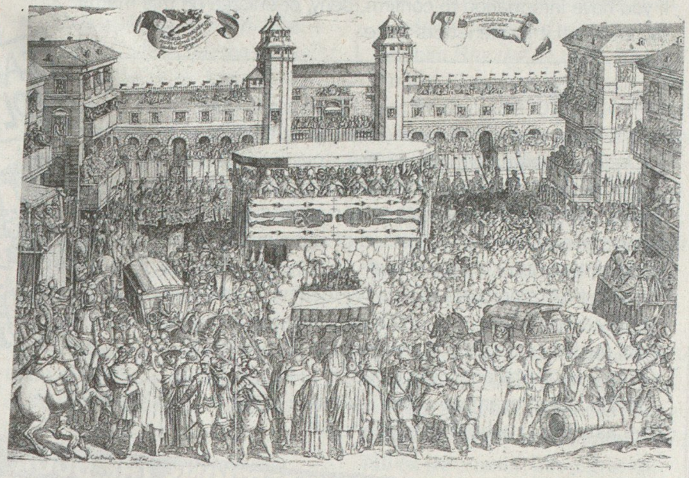
Shroud updates, big sleep still unexplained and "monkey Jesus" saves Spanish town

SHROUDED IN MYSTERY [FT313:15 etc]

A new chapter in the interminable debate concerning the woven linen cloth bearing the image of Christ crucified: writing in *History Today*, historian Charles Freeman (author of *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*) points out that the image on the Turin Shroud has not always looked as faint as it does now. A meticulously detailed engraving by Antonio Tempesta of a ceremonial display of the shroud to pilgrims in 1613 shows the figure of Christ covered in blood and scourge marks. "My research began with this engraving, as it demonstrated that the original images on the shroud were much more prominent than they are now," said Freeman. "The shroud would not have made an impact on such large crowds if they had not been. There are features – the Crown of Thorns, the long hair on Christ's neck, the space between the elbows and the body, the loincloth – that can no longer be seen today."

Fifteenth century accounts of the shroud describe "the wounds on the side, hands and feet as bloody as if they had been recent," says Freeman. In the 14th century there was a new focus on blood in depictions of the crucifixion, reflected in the visions reported by mystics such as Julian of Norwich. Freeman argues that the famous cloth was probably used as a prop in a 14th-century Easter re-enactment of the Resurrection known as the *Quem quæritis?* ("Whom do you seek?"). The dating ties in with the 1988 radiocarbon findings [**FT51:4-7**], although these have been disputed by believers in the relic's ancient and miraculous origins. No image of the shroud predates 1355, the year of its first documented appearance – in a chapel in Lirey near Troyes in France.

Barrie Schwortz, an expert in imaging and the official documenting photographer of the Shroud of Turin Research Project, dismisses Freeman's claims, emphasising how hard it is to reproduce the shroud's image. "I have examined, studied and lectured on the shroud for nearly 38 years yet would have great difficulty in describing the image on the cloth in writing," he said. "It is not an easy image to reproduce. So variations in early written descriptions or artistic copies doesn't seem like very convincing evidence against authenticity." The shroud is due to be exhibited to the public again later this year. *Guardian, 25 Oct; D.Mail, Catholic Herald, 28 Oct 2014.*



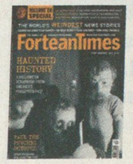
ABOVE: The Turin Shroud on display in 1613 in an engraving by Antonio Tempesta.

THE SHROUD OF THE RIPPER [320:18-19]

Following Tom Wescott's convincing demolition of *Naming Jack the Ripper* by Russell Edwards, a further development seems to have buried the author's claim that Polish immigrant barber Aaron Kosminski was "definitely, categorically and absolutely" the man who carried out the atrocities in 1888. The star evidence was a detailed analysis of DNA extracted from a silk shawl allegedly found at the murder scene of Catherine Eddowes. However, Jari Louhelainen, the molecular biologist at Liverpool John Moores University who carried out the DNA analysis, has apparently made a fatal mistake: an "error of nomenclature" when using a mitochondrial DNA database to calculate the chances of a genetic match: he wrote a crucial mutation as "314.1C" rather than "315.1C".

If this checks out, it would mean Dr Louhelainen's calculations were wrong and that virtually anyone could have left the DNA that he insisted came from the Ripper's victim. The apparent error, first noticed by crime enthusiasts in Australia blogging on the casebook.org website, has been highlighted by four experts with intimate knowledge of DNA analysis – including Professor Sir Alec Jeffreys, the inventor of genetic fingerprinting. They say the error means no DNA connection can be made between Kosminski and Eddowes. For further technical details, see Steve Connor's report in the *Independent on Sunday* (19 Oct 2014).

FRESCO FIASCO [FT294:12]



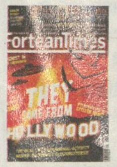
When an 83-year-old widow tried her hand at restoring a fresco of Jesus in Borja, north-eastern Spain, she faced nothing but scorn and ridicule. In 2012, Cecilia Giménez carried out "the worst restoration job in history" on *Ecce Homo* by Elías García Martínez, creating an image liked variously to a monkey or hedgehog. Someone dubbed it *Ecce Mono* (Behold the Monkey). Now, however, Señora Giménez – known, Madonna-like, simply as Cecilia – is praised to the sky. Borja, a town of just 5,000, has become a magnet for more than 150,000 curious tourists from round the world, eager to see her handiwork (entrance fee: one euro). Borja has lost some 300 jobs in the economic crisis over the past six years, but with the boom, local restaurants have remained stable and museums have seen a marked increase in visitors. Nearby vineyards are arguing over rights to splash the image on their wine labels. Her smudgy rendering is now promoted as a profound pop icon. It featured in a popular film, with a couple of thieves trying to steal it. On 25 August, the anniversary of Cecilia's transfiguration of Jesus, she will be celebrated with a comic opera, the story of how a woman ruined a fresco and saved a town. *Int. New York Times, 15 Dec 2014.*

THE BIG SLEEP [FT316:8-9]

The cause of the "sleep epidemic' in the village of Kalachi in northern Kazakhstan remains unknown. Over the last couple of years, more than 100 inhabitants have unexpectedly fallen asleep in broad daylight – some unable to wake up for several days. They have never read Washington Irving's *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* or watched the TV series or film – but they nevertheless refer to their homeland as "Sleepy Hollow". In one recent incident, children started falling down on the first day of school in September, with eight falling asleep within an hour. Before that, 20 people fainted and slept for several days, and "at least 60 at once in the winter... we laid them in rows," said an ambulance worker. People have described further symptoms, including hallucinations, memory loss, dizziness, and nausea. "I'm weak, my legs feel heavy, as if I'm wearing a hundred pairs of boots, and my head is spinning," said one woman. Other victim behaved as if drunk. It's difficult to ask for help, said another, as "your tongue gets twisted".

Virologists, radiologists and toxicologists have investigated without solving the mystery. Some local people blame the wind blowing from the neighbouring ghost town of Krasnogorsk and its Soviet-era uranium mine (closed down over 20 years ago), but no link has been found. An independent analysis of Kalachi's water, soil, and vegetation samples did not identify anything abnormal. Some doctors suspect mass psychogenic illness ("mass hysteria"). At the start of 2015, news came that Kalachi villagers are being relocated. More than half of the village's 582 residents plan to move. *rt.com/news, 17 Dec 2014. BBC News, 7 Jan 2015.*

CORPSE DOLLS [FT283:4]



Anatoly Moskvin, 46, from Nizhny Novgorod in central Russia, was arrested in November 2011 after it emerged he had dug up at least 150 corpses of girls aged three to 12 (or 12 to 26, or 15 to 30 – reports differ). He had taken them home and turned them into a collection of mummies, dolled them up with lipstick, stockings and dresses, gave them names and staged "birthday parties" for them. Reports at the time of his arrest stated the authorities found only 29 corpses in his apartment; we are not told what happened to the other 120 or so. Moskvin, an historian who speaks 13 languages, was described in court as a "genius". Last October a judge ruled that he was mentally unfit to stand trial and should remain in a psychiatric clinic. *dailymail.co.uk, 25 Oct; Adelaide Sunday Mail, 26 Oct 2014.*

FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

STOLEN CHILDREN

The following is an horrific instance of manslaughter from Fledamore, Limerick, c. 1814, with its roots deep in Irish folklore.

A seven-year-old boy "was placed naked between three large fires in a field, the parents and several of the neighbours assisting... The poor child being a cripple, and unable to move, cried out: 'Oh! Mother, dear, I am your child! Oh! Mother, dear, I am your loving child! Save me, save me!' This affecting appeal in no way operated on these inhuman wretches, who looked on unmoved till dripping flowed from him."

THE POOR CHILD BEING A CRIPPLE AND UNABLE TO MOVE, CRIED OUT: 'OH! MOTHER DEAR, I AM YOUR LOVING CHILD! SAVE ME!'

The boy's death was a changeling killing, one of several from 19th-century Britain and Ireland. These are cases where it came to be believed that a human was – as strange as this may sound – a fairy.

Now why kill a fairy living next door? Well, the fairy, it was thought, had been infiltrated into the human community when a human had been kidnapped by the fairies: hence the word 'changeling'. By hurting the 'changeling', the fairies would be forced to reverse the swap and life would return to normal. The problem was that the hurting often turned, through frenzy or (as above) incompetence, into killing.

In the 19th century, changelings were typically identified by what we think of as medical issues: babies who stopped growing, infants with genetic conditions, nursing mothers whose behaviour became unusual... These proofs were anxiously put together and then acted upon.

The changeling would next be given traditional punishments: they were forced to eat bread without water, placed on a hot shovel, they would have urine thrown at them, be beaten, exposed, dunked three times in water or sometimes just murdered with a blade.

These events were all the more disturbing because invariably the 'fairies' were children: something forgotten by modern readers for the simple reason that the most famous changeling killing was that of a woman – Bridgid Cleary – in 1895.

Consent for such practices varied greatly. Sometimes an unbalanced individual carried out the rituals alone. Sometimes it was a family. Sometimes, there was, as above, consent among several neighbouring families.

To us, these might seem like unpardonable acts. But it is interesting how, even in the 20th century, some folklore mystics took the changeling tradition seriously: Evans-Wentz believed that children were, occasionally, changed; Yeats, meanwhile, was inspired by the changeling mythos and wrote one of his most famous poems about it – 'The Stolen Child'.

Simon Young writes on folklore and history and runs www.fairyist.com

the UFO files

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FLYINGSAUCERY

ANDY ROBERTS & DR DAVID CLARKE PRESENT THEIR REGULAR SURVEY OF THE LATEST FADS AND FLAPS FROM THE WORLD OF UFOLOGY

THE BRIAN AND BOYD SHOW

Some UFO Truthers were outraged in October when TV presenter and celebrity physicist Professor Brian Cox told viewers of *Human Universe* that he believed humans were alone in the cosmos. "There is only one advanced civilisation in the cosmos and there has only ever been one," Cox said. "That's us, we are unique". One claimed it was no coincidence that Cox's programme was shown by the BBC within days of "a deathbed interview" with a retired senior scientist who is the latest to blow the whistle on the US government's secret pact with aliens. Boyd Bushman died on 7 August, just days after giving the interview in which he claimed two types of aliens from a planet called Quintumnia are stationed at Area 51. Bushman claimed American scientists are working with Russians and Chinese on anti-gravity technology at the high-security facility and a friend of his took photographs of the aliens on a disposable camera. In a bizarre twist, his friend gave the camera to the aliens – who took snaps of their home planet and returned it to him. Almost immediately viewers posted images of plastic model aliens that looked uncannily similar to those in Bushman's photographs and can be bought in WalMart stores. Not long after, the interview was removed from YouTube because of unspecified 'copyright infringement' claims, but not before it received more than one million views. But Boyd's story is too good to die with him and some Truthers suggested the plastic toys themselves are modelled on *real aliens* to prepare us for the ultimate disclosure. Whatever the truth, one conspiracy theorist was in no doubt about the part played by the BBC's favourite physicist. On his blog Ben Emlyn-Hughes said Cox was playing "a very unique and highly sinister role in the world of psychological warfare, especially in the area of scientific suppression". Welcome to the club, Brian. *Metro*, 27 Oct; *D.Mail Online*, 8 Dec 2014; Ben Emlyn-Jones blog: http://hpanwo-voice.blogspot.co.uk/2014_10_01_archive.html, 31 Oct 2014.

UFO BULGARIA

Bulgaria is not usually associated with UFOs but, as is the way with countries that are becoming slowly westernised, the eastern European Republic has taken them to its heart. Following the sighting, in October 2014, of a "large saucer of platinum colour" hovering over Sofia, the country's capital, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) Institute for Space Studies recently held its first UFO conference. Prof Lachezar Filipov of the BAS appeared on TV making the unsubstantiated claim that: "Until now this topic was sort of banned among the scientists". The witness wished to remain anonymous because he is "a serious man with large business enterprises and is afraid the people will make fun of him". So, a single witness sighting, with no photographs to back it up – yet it sparked a conference. One man's testimony was accepted as gospel, seemingly on the basis he is a 'serious man'. This is the same old 'credible witness' idea, long established in ufology, whereby if the percipient is of high social standing or a member of the police or military, the UFO community automatically confers on them the ability to decide if something is a UFO or not. In this way, even what we might call a 'poor quality' sighting can catch the attention of scientists and the press if the time is right. Flying Saucery prefers to believe that it is the 1891 Mount Buzludzha monument (below) which is luring the buggers down. www.novinite.com/articles/164917/BAS+To+Investigate+UFO+Claims www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/09/12/is-that-a-ufo-or-bulgaria-s-abandoned-buzludzha-monument-to-socialism.html

IRISH EYES ARE WATCHING

Occasionally an archive document turns up that sheds light on what governments were really thinking about flying saucers in the early days of the subject. The most recent turned up in a briefing produced by an Irish diplomat when Donald Keyhoe was writing about official tip-offs from deep throat sources high up in the US Air Force and the Pentagon. The document came to light in a collection of Foreign Office files released by The National Archives of Ireland in November. It was compiled by a diplomat in Washington DC who was caught up in the excitement of those heady days. He sent Dublin politicians a copy of Keyhoe's *The Flying Saucers are Real* – the book that really launched the UFO mythos into the world – but added that he did not "in any sense commit myself to the views expressed" in the book. Even at that early stage, hints about a cover-up were rife in Washington and the diplomat said there were rumours the book "was inspired by the US authorities so that the people... might become accustomed to the idea that there is a possibility of the inhabitants of another planet visiting this one." *Irish Herald*, 21 Nov 2014.

SAUCY STAN

Our friends at the Magonia Blogspot deserve due recognition for alerting the world to the secret life of Stan Friedman, Nuclear Physicist and believer in the physical reality of aliens visiting Earth. Go to the link below and you'll see him advertising a popular American brand of pasta sauce. We can only speculate that Stan intends to greet his extraterrestrial friends by serving them Alien Alphabetti Spaghetti! http://pelicanist.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/pasta-joke.html www.stantonfriedman.com

Stanton Friedman

UFO CASEBOOK

JENNY RANDLES SUGGESTS CHECKING ALIEN ENCOUNTERS AGAINST ASTRONOMICAL DISCOVERIES

ALIEN HOME WORLDS

Two very different comments from space scientists inspire this month's column. The first came in the early 1970s when I took astronomy at Manchester University with Professor Zdenek Kopal, an erudite Czech researcher who headed the department when space exploration was young. Kopal was fascinated by the possibility that other stars had planets orbiting them, like our own Sun. At the time exosolar planets were impossible to find because such small and dim worlds get swamped by the glare of the parent star, even the nearest of which is a quarter of a million times further away than our Sun.

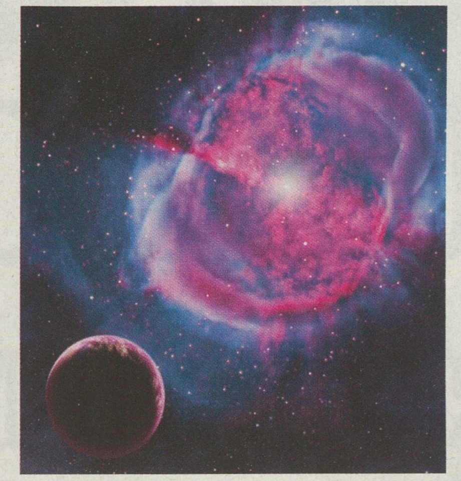
It took years to find search methods that overcame these problems, but Kopal knew we were at the dawn of a new era. Oddly, though, given my then embryonic interest in UFOs – of which he was dismissive – Kopal was adamant that we should never embrace contact with other worlds. I recall him saying wryly that: "If you hear the space phone ringing, don't answer". He clarified this opinion by arguing from historical examples in which a superior civilisation met an inferior technological one. The superior technology rapidly eradicated the inferior one by taking over land and resources, regardless of any specifically evil intent.

Flash forward 43 years and there are now many ways to look for exo-Solar planets with modern equipment. Countless alien worlds have been located and, as of November 2014, there were over 1,850 planets confirmed around more than 1,000 other suns. There is now little doubt that stars with several planets around them are the normal way of the universe. In fact, around 20 per cent of them are already believed to have planets not dissimilar in size to our world orbiting them – often at distances that would make them potentially suitable for hosting life, because solid surfaces, equitable temperatures and liquid water all appear likely there.

Enter physicist and TV presenter, Brian Cox, who coincidentally took astronomy lectures at Manchester University two decades after me. He announced to the media in October that he thinks we are alone in our own galactic environment, as mentioned in this month's Flying Saucery. His reasoning involved the complex chain of events during which intelligent life evolves. He argued that there will be no other advanced civilisation on the many Earth-like planets being found; indeed, if there were, then any species advanced enough should have spread across local space and become obvious.

In other words, as the space phone has *not* rung, despite all of those potential callers out there, then nobody is at home. Perhaps there was a call 50 million years ago (yesterday in terms of star systems), but there would have been no answer as intelligent life on Earth was countless millennia away from emerging.

Interestingly, despite the passage of four decades, Cox seems as distrustful of UFO encounters as was Kopal. Of course, some readers may feel that their perspective is short sighted. UFO data – especially alien contact cases – might be just that ringing space phone. It might, although I have doubts about the alien origin of UFOs. Nonetheless, alien contact cases happen and it remains a possibility they have some external source, so it would be foolish to ignore this data in debates about searches for aliens. But science often does – based on assumption that the data must be untrustworthy.



The alien world Jayne saw had a hot, desert landscape

However, the now successful search for exosolar planets brings a rare opportunity for UFO researchers: an experiment that could tackle this issue head-on. We can look at what witnesses claim about the nature and environment of alien home worlds via their alleged direct contacts and compare this with what science has now discovered; for astronomers are increasingly able to identify the physical make-up and environment of these real alien worlds that are being added to the galactic atlas.

So how do UFO witness claims about alien planets match up with those 1,850+ planets science has so far proven to exist?

It's still early days, as the first planet orbiting a Sun-like star was proven less than 20 years ago, and the first details of alien atmospheric make-up date back only 18 months. Plus, there are other problems. Most alien contact stories are personal tales in which witnesses tend not to claim a visit to another world and their accounts about where the aliens originate are sketchy. So our database is limited and needs a global research effort in order to compile enough cases to be statistically meaningful. Moreover, the planets that have been identified by astrophysicists are often (but not always) unlikely abodes for life that might easily visit Earth. This is changing as science develops new methods for finding smaller planets and adds to the numbers of Earth-like worlds.

I looked at my files to see what could happen if this experiment were adopted by ufology.

For instance, Jayne, an American born woman living in Manchester, described the vivid 'images' revealed during her encounters. She saw and felt an alien home world as having a hot desert landscape with small ridges. Overhead was a plum-coloured sky and small balls of white light zig zagging across and swooping down before passing through her body, imprinting deep emotional shifts as they passed through.

In another case, Audrey from Devon reported to me the visions she felt came from an alien entity called 'Gok' who described how contactees like her were links in a chain of cosmic education, easily contacted because they had lived on an alien home world before being born on Earth. In this case, that world encircled the Alpha Centauri triple star system.

In a further example, a witness from the American Midwest told me how her alien visitors (white-skinned, blue-eyed and hairless) came from a planet around the star Zeta Tucanæ.

I took this sample at random from cases reported to me over the years, but all were on record *before* exosolar planets began to be documented in the 1990s. The full database of UFO records around the world should have sufficient cases to legitimately compare with unfolding scientific discoveries about real alien planets.

So, are there interesting links in the astronomical findings so far? Well, there are certainly Earth-sized desert worlds. Of the 60 or so for which atmospheres have been determined, three orbiting Sun-like stars appear similar to the description offered by Jayne.

Alpha Centauri – the closest star system to Earth, just over four light years away – is not very promising as a home for inhabited planets owing to its multiple suns likely influencing planetary orbits. However, in 2012 an Earth-sized planet was found there, though beyond the zone where water might exist.

As for Zeta Tucanæ, this star system is 28 light years away – very local in terms of the billions of suns out there. Interestingly, science has found this star has many similarities with our own Sun – though a little hotter – and regard it as one of the most promising in the search for extraterrestrial life. Indeed, it was selected in a list of 100 stars for a more intensive search. While, as yet, no planets have been found, they seem likely because a 'debris disc' has been discovered round the star and this is commonly associated with the formation of planets. I think these observations are enough to illustrate that UFO research could conduct a deeper comparative study, as proposed, one that could yield interesting results. Moreover, it certainly indicates why we should pay close attention to the rapidly expanding and exciting search for real alien home worlds.

NICHOLAS ROERICH

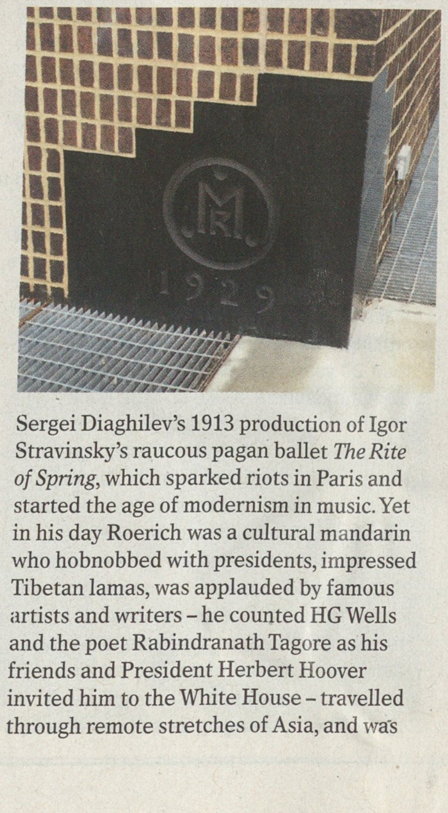
SEEKER OF SHAMBHALA

GARY LACHMAN delves into the many lives of Nicholas Roerich – artist, explorer, archæologist and guru – and his extraordinary campaign to start a political and spiritual revolution based on the ancient myths of a mysterious hidden kingdom in northern Asia

Visitors to New York City's Upper West Side may wonder about a peculiar cornerstone that adorns a 24-storey skyscraper at 310 Riverside Drive. Embedded in the base of the towering deco-style structure – an architectural showpiece overlooking the Hudson – is a shiny black surface, engraved with a circle, within which are three spheres forming a pyramid, the year "1929", and the initials "MR". Inside the stone, according to some accounts, is a casket containing secret papers and other mysterious paraphernalia. Today, the Master Building, as the skyscraper is called, is a housing co-operative inhabited by well-heeled New Yorkers. In its heyday, however, it was a striking testament to the idealism and success of one of the most remarkable 'gurus' of the 20th century, the Russian painter, writer, explorer, and archæologist Nicholas Roerich.

From its opening just before the Great Wall Street Crash, to its closing in the aftermath of the Depression, the Master Building was headquarters for Roerich's worldwide campaign to promote culture, peace and spirituality through the arts. Here Roerich established the *Cor Ardens* – "Blazing Hearts" – Art Association, and the *Corona Mundi* – "Crown of the World" – Master Institute of United Arts. Schools of architecture, painting, music, drama, interior design and dance, as well as galleries, auditoria and lecture halls were housed within the Master Building, which was originally planned to taper to a Buddhist stupa (in the end, five additional stories were added instead) and whose stylised brickwork shifts from dark to light as it soars upward.

IN HIS DAY, HE WAS A CULTURAL MANDARIN WHO HOBNOBBED WITH ARTISTS AND PRESIDENTS



Roerich is best known for providing the sets, costume design and inspiration for Sergei Diaghilev's 1913 production of Igor Stravinsky's raucous pagan ballet *The Rite of Spring*, which sparked riots in Paris and started the age of modernism in music. Yet in his day Roerich was a cultural mandarin who hobnobbed with presidents, impressed Tibetan lamas, was applauded by famous artists and writers – he counted HG Wells and the poet Rabindranath Tagore as his friends and President Herbert Hoover invited him to the White House – travelled through remote stretches of Asia, and was nominated three times for a Nobel Peace Prize. He created some 7,000 paintings, many of the Himalayas and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, all imbued with a peculiar sense of colour, fine line and dream-like lucidity. Among his admirers was HP Lovecraft, who speaks of Roerich's work in *At the Mountains of Madness*.

The three spheres within a circle on the Master Building's cornerstone – a symbol that Roerich believed reached into prehistory – are the emblem of the Roerich Peace Pact, an international treaty designed to protect works of art and culture in times of war; the pact received Franklin Delano Roosevelt's signature in the White House in 1935 and was later adopted by dozens of nations.

But perhaps the most remarkable project of this mystical mover and shaker was his attempt to establish an independent Buddhist nation in the rugged and forbidding lands of northern Asia – what he called a 'Sacred Union of the East'. In the 1920s and 1930s, Roerich sought to spark a spiritual and political revolution in Tibet, Mongolia, China, and Russia, based on the ancient myths of the secret land of Shambhala, that would bring together Buddhists and create a spiritual and political force to be reckoned with. According to various legends, Shambhala is a mysterious land secluded in inner Asia. It's mentioned in many ancient texts, such as the *Kalachakra Tantra*, an esoteric Tibetan Buddhist teaching concerning the 'cycles of time'. The Zhang Zhung culture, which pre-dates Tibetan Buddhism, speaks of it, as does the much older Hindu *Vishnu Purana*, which calls Shambhala the birthplace of the

LEFT: The cornerstone of the Master Building.
OPPOSITE: Nicholas Roerich in Naggar, India, 1931.

NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

MILE DARIA

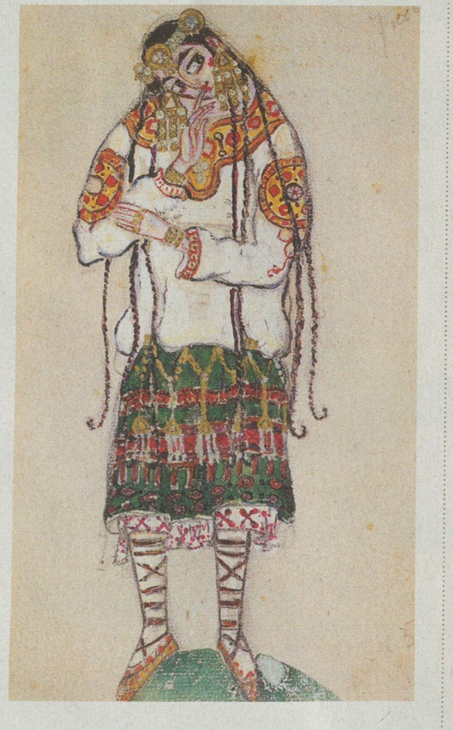
ABOVE LEFT: Roerich (seated, second from left) photographed in 1914 in Talashkino, Smolensk Province, where he had restored and decorated the church with mosaics and paintings. **BELOW:** One of Roerich's costume designs for *Rite of Spring*, 1912. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The Buddhist temple in St Petersburg, which opened in 1915.

Kalki, the last incarnation of Vishnu, who will inaugurate a new Golden Age, the *Satya Yuga*. In trying to fuse disparate Buddhists into one people, Roerich portrayed himself as the reincarnation of the legendary Tibetan hero Rigden-jyepo, who is associated with the Maitreya Buddha, whose return would, so the legend goes, inaugurate an era of universal brotherhood.

FROM ANCIENT RUSSIA TO THE MYSTIC EAST

Nicholas Roerich was born in 1874 to a well-off St Petersburg family. His father was a lawyer and notary public, with a deep love of the arts, and from an early age Roerich knew many artists, poets and writers. A fascination with Russia's ancient past began when an archæologist friend took young Nicholas to visit some prehistoric tumuli. Hands-on experience of Russia's prehistory stimulated a passion for the past that remained with Roerich throughout his life. He showed artistic talent early on, and by his teens announced that he would become an artist. His father thought this impractical and counselled studying law. They reached a compromise, and at 19 Roerich enrolled in the Academy of Arts and St Petersburg University simultaneously, an early sign of the polymath to come. A painting of Kangchenjunga, the sacred mountain of the Himalayas, at his family's estate in Isvara, fascinated young Roerich, and inspired a lifelong love of the snow-capped peaks.

Roerich moved in a milieu any budding artist would dream of. By the age of 20 he had met the composers Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Stravinsky, as well as the great bass Fyodor Chaliapin, whose portrayal of Mephistopheles in Gounod's *Faust* triggered a craze for the satanic in Silver Age St Petersburg. At concerts Roerich heard the music of Prokofiev and Scriabin (a noted Theosophist) and became a passionate Wagnerian. Wagner's ideal was the *Gesamtkuntswek*, or 'total art work', combining music, theatre, and poetry, an ambition embodied in his operas and which Roerich himself embraced. By 1906, Roerich was the director of the Imperial Society for the Encouragement of the Arts and had joined Diaghilev's "World of Art" association, later becoming its president. On a tour of Russia he painted fortresses, monasteries, churches, monuments, Russian saints and legends, and designed religious art for sites in Russia and the Ukraine. His love of Russia's past emerged in his sets and decorations for Borodin's *Prince Igor* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Maid of Pskov (Ivan the Terrible)*. Roerich's paintings were part of Diaghilev's Paris exhibition of 1906 and it is no exaggeration to say that he was an indispensable part of the success of the Ballets Russes.



Yet there was another side to Roerich, a profound hunger for spirituality that emerged in his religious paintings and which came to dominate his life after his marriage to Helena Shaposhnikov, the daughter of a famous architect. Roerich met Helena in 1901; from the start they recognised themselves as cosmic twins and married soon after. From an early age Helena was subject to strange fits and had visions of her body in flames. She suggested Roerich read the yogis Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and the *Bhagavad Gita*, and introduced him to the work of Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society (see **FT302:32-37**). Helena later translated Blavatsky's magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, into Russian; although Russian herself, Blavatsky wrote in English, and her works were banned in Russia for some time. Helena believed that she was in spiritual contact with Blavatsky's own hidden 'Masters', highly evolved individuals who, Blavatsky claimed, resided in a secret monastery in Tibet; that she and Blavatsky shared a forename may have helped. Helena entered trances in order to contact these adepts; among other things they told her that her fiery visions were the result of 'new energies' forming in her body. Nicholas soon made contact with them too, and he and Helena developed their own mystical teaching, Agni Yoga, named after the Hindu god of fire as well as Helena's spiritual spontaneous combustion. Agni Yoga, or 'Living Ethics', was communicated to the Roerichs by Master Morya, and in later years they would claim that their mysterious journeys to the East were directed by the same Master – an esoteric Sat Nav system that impressed many acquaintances.

NIZNOZ

NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

ABOVE LEFT: The Master Building, 310-312 Riverside Drive, New York City. **ABOVE RIGHT AND BELOW:** Nicholas Roerich at the newly-opened Roerich Museum, NYC, in 1929.

That Roerich should turn to the mystic East was not unusual. These were the last days of the Great Game, the geopolitical chess match between Russia and Great Britain over influence in northern Asia. For years, Russia had harboured dreams of a 'Russian Asia', and many northern Buddhists believed that they would do better under the Russians than the British. The Tsar's court was filled with lovers of the East, characters like Zhamsaran Badmaieff, a practitioner of Tibetan medicine, and Prince Esper Ukhtomsky, an Orientalist, Buddhist and Theosophist (he is sometimes identified as Prince Lubovedsky in Gurdjieff's *Meetings With Remarkable Men*).

In 1909, Agvan Dorzhiev, a Buryat Buddhist monk , who was envoy and tutor to the 13th Dalai Lama, was allowed to build a Buddhist temple in St Petersburg, which he dreamed would one day house the first Buddhist Tsar. Dorzhiev told Tsar Nicholas II that the Tibetans viewed Russia as a northern Shambhala; it was, the legend said, located north of India. As Roerich worked on Dorzhiev's temple, designing its stained glass windows, he became fascinated with the legends of Shambhala, which Dorzhiev used to promote his own dream of an independent Buddhist state under the protection of the Russian bear; the Mongols, Prince Ukhtomsky had told him, believed the Tsar was an incarnate Buddha. Sadly, this dream became a nightmare. The temple was sacked by the Bolsheviks in 1917 and Dorzhiev was arrested. He was saved from execution at the last minute by powerful friends, and spent years secluded in his temple. He was arrested again in 1937 during the Stalin purges and died in prison at the age of 85. The temple, plundered and abused during the Communist regime, was re-consecrated in 1989 and is active today as a centre for the practice and study of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism.

NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

JOURNEYS TO THE WEST

Some of Roerich's paintings from this time seem to prophesy the catastrophe of WWI, a precognition he shared with the psychologist CG Jung and the Expressionist painter Ludwig Meidner, both of whom recorded similar visions. On the heels of war came revolution. Roerich had no love for the Bolsheviks – Bolshevism, he said, was "the distortion of the sacred ideas of humankind" – and he was saved from the worst of the revolution by his doctor, who suggested he go to Sortavala, in Finland, to recuperate from pneumonia.

Perhaps he simply knew which way the wind was blowing; in any case, the exodus proved providential for Roerich's career. From Finland, the Roerichs – by this time they had two sons – went to Sweden, where his work was shown, and in 1919, they moved to London, where Roerich designed sets for Sir Thomas Beecham's Covent Garden Theatre. It's believed that the Roerichs joined the Theosophical Society while in England. This would make sense. Since 1882 the society's headquarters had been in Adyar, India, and for some time Roerich's real target was the sub-continent. But this required funds, and for the time being he, like Columbus, steered west. In 1920 the Chicago Art Institute invited him to exhibit his work on a US tour. From autumn 1920 to the spring of 1923 Roerich's work travelled across America, while he designed sets for

NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

ABOVE: Roerich (right) with wife Helena (second from right) and son George in the Altai, August 1926. **BELOW:** In Ulan Bator, Mongolia, March 1927.

the Chicago Opera.

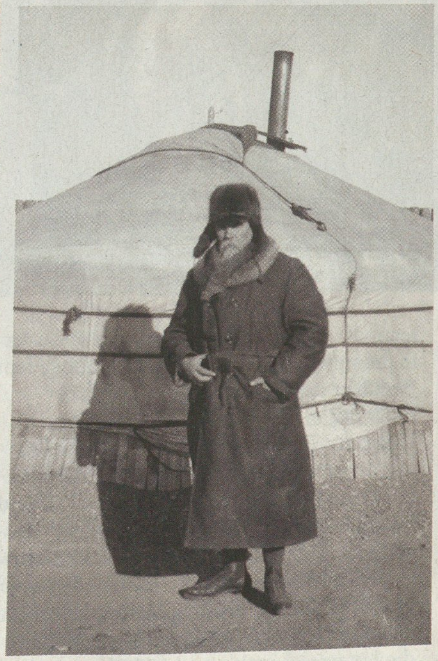
The Roerichs settled in New York where they began the work that would result in the Master Building. Roerich was feted in Manhattan. Charming, impressive and enigmatic at turns – he accentuated his Mongol-like features with a Fu-Manchu moustache and beard and had taken to Eastern garb – he began to gather followers. Two of them, Louis Horch, a successful broker, and his wife Nettie, financed much of Roerich's work for the next decade and a half. Horch was convinced Roerich was a true teacher and prophet and, after clearing his debts, funded the first phase of his world culture campaign. Later, on the site of his own mansion, Horch broke ground for the Master Building.

Roerich told Horch that his cultural activities were the exoteric, outer face of his work; the inner, esoteric side was its true *raison d'etre.* This, Horch and the others learned, was the inauguration of a new age, that of the Maitreya Buddha and Shambhala. Roerich's inner circle received special rings and secret esoteric names and were taught Agni Yoga methods of meditation.

THE SEARCH FOR SHAMBHALA

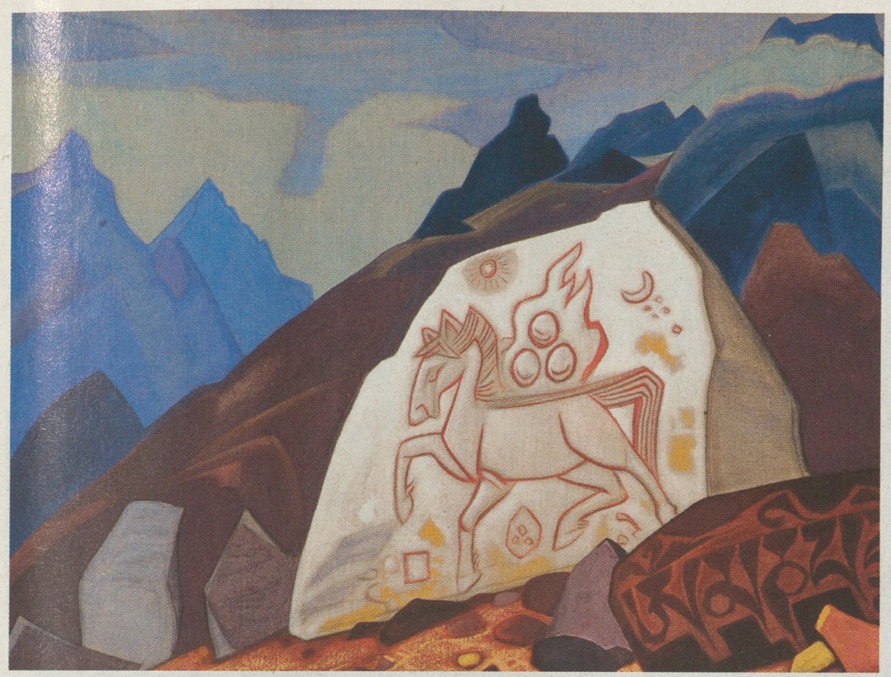
Among the many activities that Horch funded was Roerich's first attempt to discover Shambhala – or, failing that, to create it. But, as we've seen, Roerich was not the first Russian to envision an independent Buddhist state. In *Beasts, Men and Gods* the Polish writer and traveller Ferdinand Ossendowski tells of his adventures in Mongolia as he fled the chaos of the Russian Civil War and rise of the Bolsheviks. Ossendowski learned of a mysterious subterranean city, Agharti, ruled by a secret 'King of the World'. Although very different in character, Agharti and Shambhala have often been conflated: while Shambhala is a land of peace and harmony, Agharti is generally characterised as a rather evil place, a totalitarian realm in which the omnipotent King of the World rules via secret agents and surveillance systems. Ossendowski did not immediately reject these tales of a hidden world because he had already encountered an extraordinary individual who for a time was dictator of Mongolia. Roman Ungern von Sternberg, a White Russian ex-lieutenant general, had set himself up as an independent warlord, and his raids on both White and Red Russian supply trains were so violent that he had earned the nickname of the 'Bloody Baron'. Ungern von Sternberg believed he was the reincarnation of Genghis Khan and he practised a severe Buddhism that included gratuitous violence and a fierce hatred of Communists and Jews. After a brief association with the Japanese, he formed an 'Order of Military Buddhists' and succeeded in capturing Ulan Bator. He was eventually defeated by the Soviets and it is said that before his execution he *chewed* the Cross of St George medal earned for his bravery, rather than let it fall into enemy hands.

> THE ESOTERIC SIDE OF HIS WORK WAS THE INAUGURATION OF A NEW AGE OF SHAMBHALA

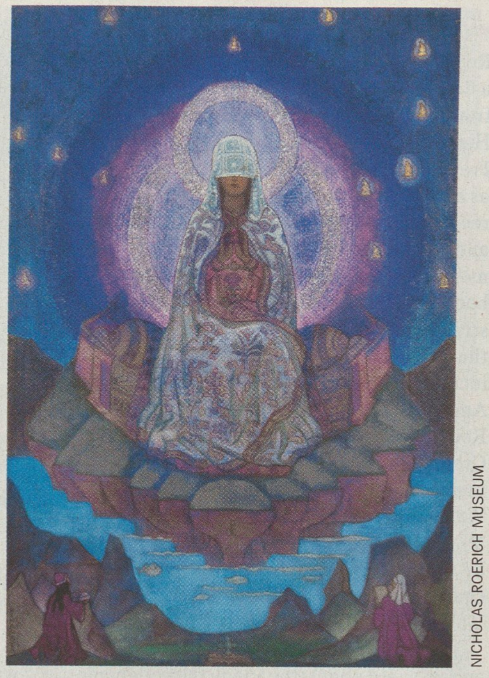


NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

Roerich, although peace-loving, had grander plans. The ostensible aim of the First Roerich Asian Expedition (1925-1929) – which trekked through the Punjab, Kashmir, Ladakh, the Karakoram and Altai Mountains, Mongolia, and the Gobi Desert en route to Tibet – was to provide inspiration for his painting, and ethnographic and artistic materials for his sons. But Roerich's real aim was to spread the word about Shambhala.



NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM



NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

ABOVE LEFT: *White Stone (Signs of Chintamani)*, 1933. **ABOVE LEFT:** *Mother of the World. Sketch* (from the 'Banners of the East' series), 1924. **BELOW:** Delegates of the Second International Conference dedicated to the Roerich Pact, Bruges, 1932. The Banner of Peace hangs from the gateway above them.

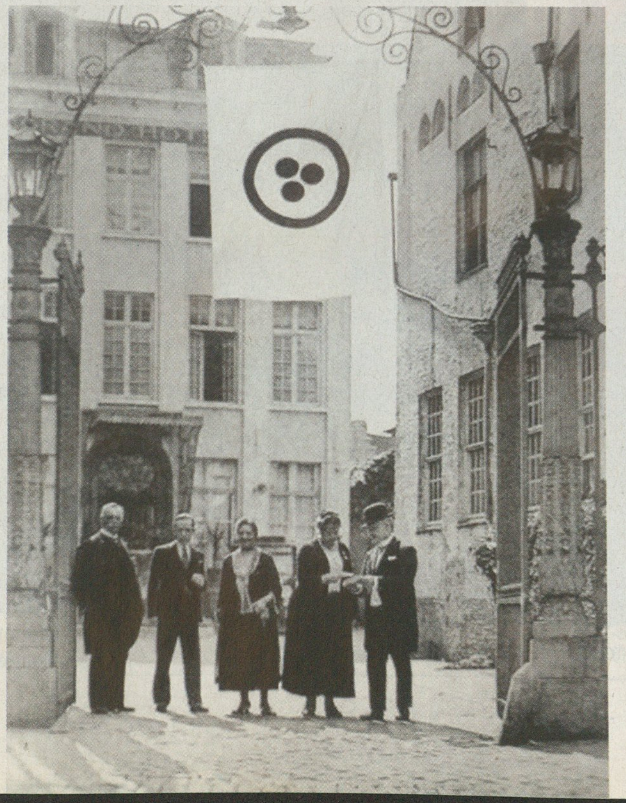
In *The Heart of Asia* Roerich speaks of a strange stone said to have reached Earth from another star, perhaps Sirius. Part of this stone resides in Shambhala, while a part circulates "throughout the Earth, retaining its magnetic link with the main stone". In Paris in October 1923, en route to India, Roerich is said to have received a strange package. Within it was a small box with mysterious decorations, containing a black meteorite. This, Roerich believed, was a piece of the Chintamani stone, the 'wish-granting gem' of Tibetan legend, which some associate with the legendary *lapis exilis* or 'stone from the heavens' of alchemy and the Grail legends. Roerich painted many canvases on the Chintamani theme and part of the aim of his expedition may have been to return the fragment to its source, thus initiating the return of Rigden-jyepo, the incarnation of Maitreya, and the start of the new age.

LAMAS AND COMMISSARS

Roerich's more immediate aim was to make contact with the Panchen Lama, who had fled Tibet in 1923 over a disagreement with the Dalai Lama. The office of the Dalai Lama is better known in the West, but the Panchen Lama is of equal importance and is considered the spiritual head of Tibet, while the Dalai Lama has a more secular role. The current Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyiman, was taken into 'protective custody' in 1995 at the age of six by the Chinese authorities and has not been seen since. Roerich believed that the then Dalai Lama was corrupt and that if the Panchen Lama returned to Tibet, it would embolden Buddhists across northern Asia to unite. The Panchen Lama's return, he believed, could trigger the new age of Shambhala.

Readers interested in Roerich's travels should read his fascinating *Altai-Himalaya*, which among other wonders records an early UFO sighting. But perhaps the strangest spot on his itinerary was Moscow. In London, Roerich had written articles supporting the White Russians, and his remarks about Bolshevism were always negative. But now he realised his plans needed Soviet support; he also wanted to retrieve his library and art collection, confiscated by the Bolsheviks. A new phase of the Great Game had started, this time between the Soviets and Britain. The Soviets were making overtures to Lhasa, which was under British influence and, his remarks about Bolshevism notwithstanding, Britain considered Roerich a possible Soviet agent. But exactly which side Roerich was on was confusing: he was a Russian national whose expedition flew an American flag next to a Tibetan *thangka*. Both British and American eyebrows were raised when, after a four-month delay in Khotan, China, Roerich suddenly veered westward to Moscow. Roerich had told the Soviet Consul in Urumchi that he had material of great interest to the USSR – possibly intelligence about the British. He also told them that he had letters from the hidden Masters for Stalin, and, reminding them of Dorzhiev's remarks about a 'northern Shambhala,' he announced that his and the Masters' task was to "unite Buddhism with Communism to create a great Oriental Federation". This required retrieving the Panchen Lama from Mongolia and freeing Tibet of the British. Two months later, Roerich was in Moscow speaking to Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Educational Commissioner and a devotee of Madame Blavatsky. The Russians listened with interest but were unsure of Roerich's real aims. After a meeting with the secret police, Lunacharksy told his fellow Theosophist that he should leave the USSR immediately: his countrymen suspected him of being an American spy.

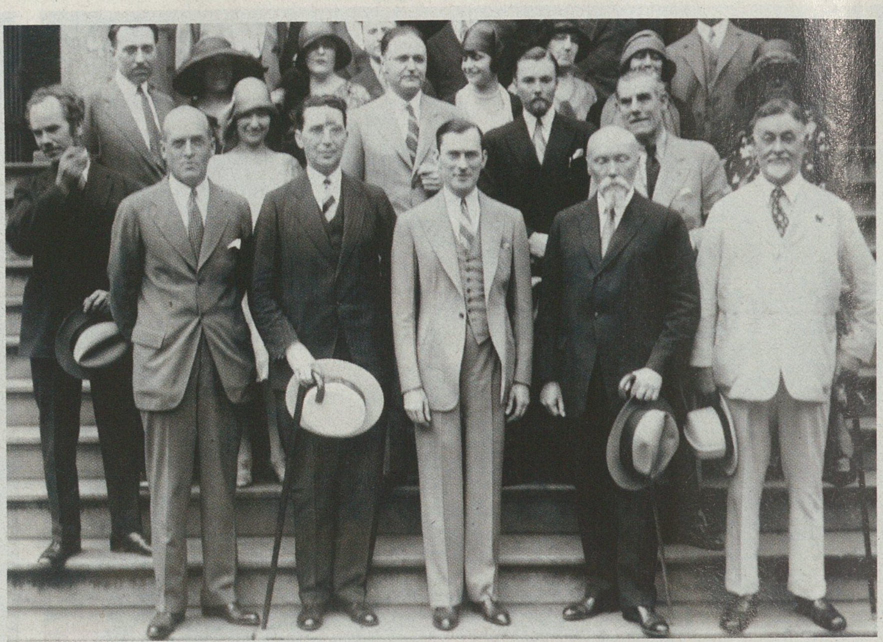
When the British heard of Roerich's plan, they advised the Dalai Lama to avoid entering Tibet. They were convinced Roerich was working for the Soviets and that his plans for Shambhala included a Communist-backed revolution. The Dalai Lama agreed, and for several months Roerich's party waited, south of the Kamrong Pass, in one of the coldest spots on the planet, for permission to cross the border. It never came. Their supplies dwindled; they had only summer tents for shelter; pack animals died and so did men. Appeals for help were ignored. Finally they were allowed to head to Sikkim, where they were escorted into India. Shambhala would have to wait.



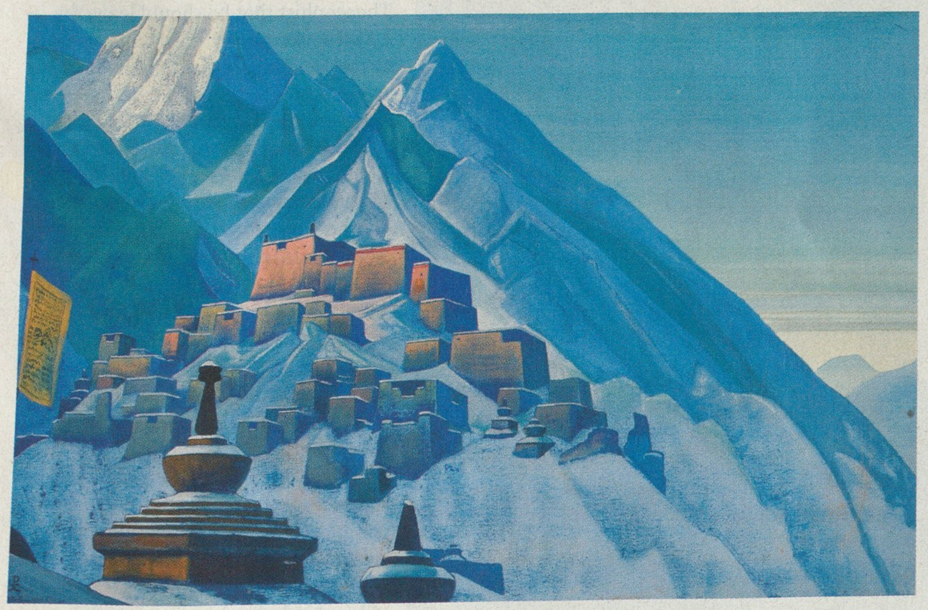
THE PLAN

Roerich took another shot at Shambhala a decade later, this time with backing from the US government. In 1929, he met Henry Wallace, a Washington politician, Freemason and devotee of the occult, as well as a successful agriculturalist. Roerich had recovered from the first 'Shambolic' mission, and was vigorously promoting his Peace Pact, mentioned earlier. Wallace was enthused. He became a passionate supporter and lobbied strenuously for the idea; it was his support that led to FDR's approval (other backers included Albert Einstein and Bernard Shaw). Another idea of Wallace's, said to stem from Roerich, was the use of the verso of the Great Seal, with its Masonic all-seeing eye in a pyramid, on the back of the US dollar. Wallace told the Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau that *Novus Ordo Seclorum* could be read as FDR's catchphrase "New Deal." Only later did Morgenthau realise that Wallace had a different 'New Age' in mind.

Wallace entered Roerich's inner circle and was told about 'the Plan', the codename for Shambhala. It soon became clear that his agricultural expertise and position as Agricultural Secretary could be useful. In 1934 Wallace suggested to FDR that Roerich head a mission to Mongolia to collect samples of drought-resistant grasses. America had entered the Dust Bowl, the agricultural crisis following the Depression, and needed to develop methods of dry-land farming. Roerich, who had by this time settled in India, would lead a botanical expedition and gather helpful specimens. Roerich's reputation as a possible Soviet agent, as well as a mystic, prejudiced Wallace's colleagues against the idea, but he was persuasive, and with two government botanists in tow, Roerich headed into a northern Asia even more unstable than a decade earlier. Things, however, quickly fell apart. Roerich's ideas about the expedition were not those of the botanists, and his own personal escort of armed White Russian Cossacks did not help. While he did collect some grasses, Roerich spent more time visiting Buddhist monasteries, speaking with monks about Rigden-jyepo and the imminent 'War of Shambhala', and perhaps showing them the Chintamnai stone. Reports say he was convincing and that many monks believed him. It was clear he had something more than grass in mind. In Inner Mongolia, Soviet suspicions were aroused by the American-supported Russian mystic spreading rumours about a coming New Age. Roerich's remarks about the return of the Panchen Lama and the advent of Shambhala seemed to suggest that the US was backing a holy war against Communist rule. When reports of Roerich's activities first reached Wallace, he dismissed them and continued to support 'the Plan', but when Louis Horch, who had recently filed suit against Roerich for $200,000 in unpaid loans, told Wallace that Roerich was assuring Mongolians of US support for an uprising, he tried to reel his guru in. That 'the Plan' would require a revolution had escaped Wallace. Roerich ignored Wallace's messages and continued to recruit disaffected Buddhists until Wallace, realising his mistake, terminated the mission. Soon after Wallace broke with his guru.


NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

TOP: Opening ceremony of the new quarters of the Roerich Museum, New York, October 1929. Roerich is second from right, Louis Horch second from left.

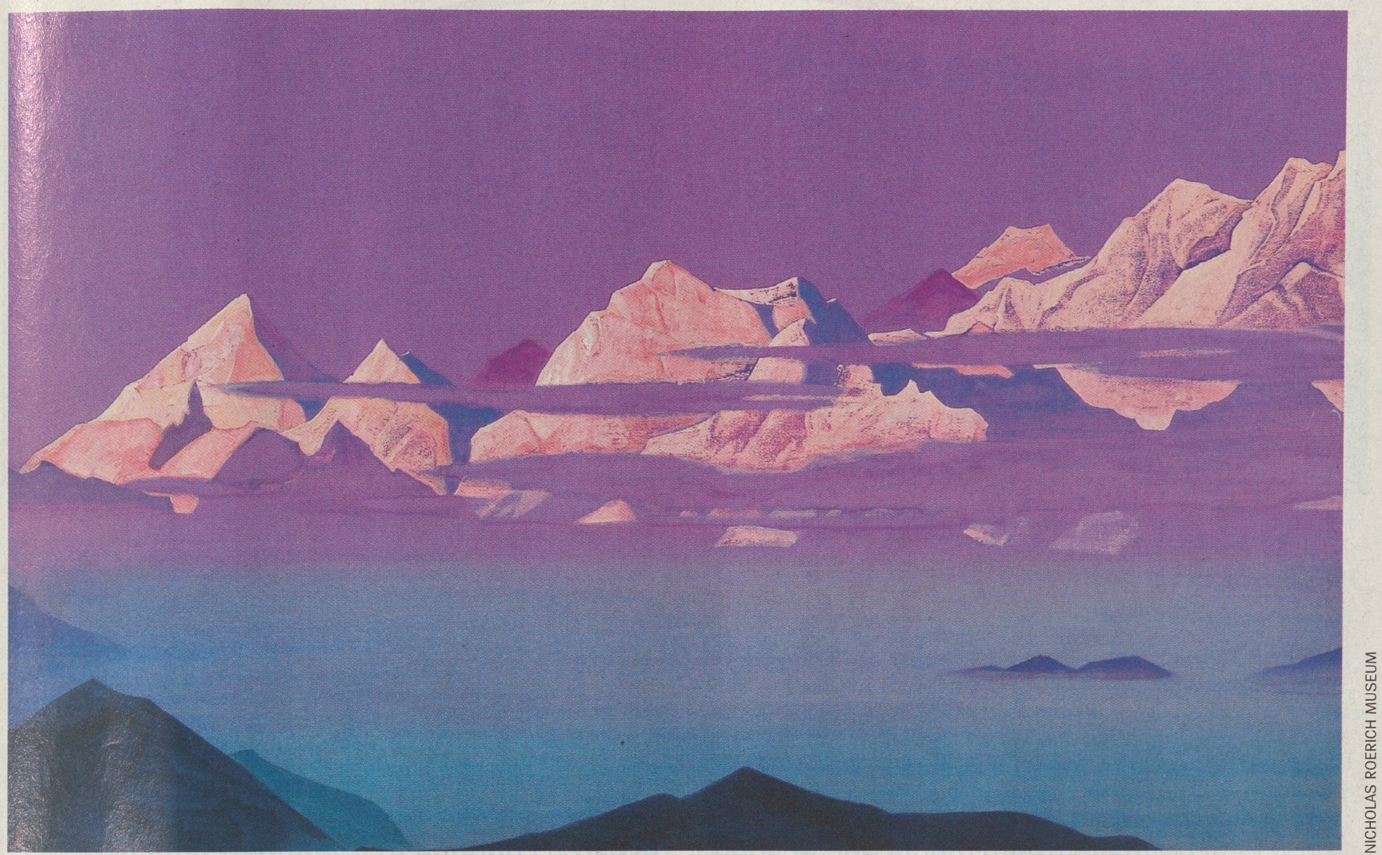

NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

ABOVE: *Tibet. Himalayas*, 1933. **FACING PAGE, TOP:** *Himalayas (The Pink Mountains)*, 1933.

THE END OF THE MASTER

By this time, Horch had gained control of much of Roerich's work, as well as the Master Building, appropriating them in return for the unpaid loans. He also testified against Roerich in a legal battle between his former guru and the US government for tax evasion. Roerich's appeal was denied and the $50,000 he owed had to be paid. Roerich wisely remained in India for the rest of his life; he died in Naggar, Himachal Pradesh, at the site of his Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute, in 1947. He continued to meet world-famous figures, among them Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, both of whom were Theosophists. Wallace would later regret his association with the modern day Rigden-jyepo. When running for vice-president on FDR's bid for a third term, copies of Wallace's letters to Roerich – headed "Dear Guru" – got into the wrong hands and the Democrats were only saved by a sex scandal involving their Republican opponent Wendell Wilkie. Both parties agreed to keep their secrets secret. But in 1948 Wallace, inspired by Roerich's assurance that he would one day hold the office, ran as an independent candidate for the presidency. The 'Guru Letters' emerged again and hit the papers. Wallace now called Roerich a "disgruntled ex-employee" and "tax-evader", but his reputation as a mystic and the tone of the letters, asking Roerich for advice on political matters, scuppered Wallace's already slim chances.

Roerich's plan to initiate the return of Rigden-jyepo, incarnate Maitreya, and inaugurate the age of Shambhala were pipe dreams; it's said that when the Panchen Lama heard of Roerich's scheme he said he would have nothing to do with it. But however faulty his politics, Roerich's vision was a vital ingredient in his art, which remains powerful and transformative. Intrepid tourists can see some of Roerich's fantastic works in the wonderful Nicholas Roerich Museum at 319 West 107th Street, a few blocks north of the Master Building. Few who do realise that along with the spiritual inspiration for Roerich's mesmerising canvases was a real ambition to redraw the map of Asia.


NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

NICHOLAS ROERICH MUSEUM

ABOVE: Roerich in Naggar, India, 1936.

With thanks to Daniel Entin and Gvido Trepsa of the Nicholas Roerich Museum

Nicholas Roerich Museum,
319 West 107th Street, New York, NY 10025
www.roerich.org

Admission is free, and the Museum is open 12-5 Tue-Fri, 2-5 Sat-Sun and is closed Mondays.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

GARY LACHMAN was a founding member of Blondie and has written articles for FT on everything from hypnagogia to Rudolf Steiner. His latest book is *Revolutionaries of the Soul: Reflections on Magicians, Philosophers and Occultists* (Quest Books, 2014).

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"I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but..."

Why do mainstream media and academic research continue to promote scepticism about conspiracy theories in a world where we know that conspiracies take place on a regular basis? **MATTHEW DENTITH** argues that we are all conspiracy theorists now – whether we acknowledge it or not.

On 1 November 2006, Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned with the rare, expensive and highly radioactive radionuclide, polonium-210. Litvinenko, a former Russian Federal Security Service agent, was living in exile in London, promoting various conspiracy theories about President Vladimir Putin's rise to power in Russia. He had met two of his former colleagues for tea, and one of his former friends surreptitiously slipped the poison into Litvinenko's teapot (see **FT218:4-5**).

Death by polonium-210 is slow and painful. Despite being administered a lethal dose – 200 times the amount required to kill a human being – it took three weeks for Litvinenko to die. On his deathbed, he accused the Russian Federal Security Service and Foreign Intelligence Service – the successors to the KGB – as well as Putin himself, as being involved in a conspiracy to silence him.

Polonium-210 is an unusual choice of poison. Refining or getting access to the radionuclide is so difficult that you have to ask why the assassins did not use a cheaper, more accessible toxin. Polonium-210 is also an obvious poison, in that its high radioactivity, combined with the fact it was transported in a not-particularly hermetically sealed container, meant that minute traces of the substance could be tracked back to the cab in which the assassins travelled, and even to the planes and trains they used to get to London from Moscow.

> The big question is just which conspiracy theory offers the best explanation

AFP / GETTY IMAGES

LEFT: A picture of Alexander Litvinenko is pinned to flowers outside the University College Hospital in central London, 23 November 2007.

All of this sounds like the stuff of a particularly gripping spy thriller; but, as we know, it really happened. And given what we know about the death of Alexander Litvinenko, it seems certain that his death was the result of a conspiracy. After all, his murder had to be plotted by a range of conspirators who acted in secret. The big question, then, is which conspiracy *theory* offers the best explanation?

One option is that Litvinenko was killed at the behest of the Russian state as a show of power by the Kremlin. However, this is not the only possibility. Another is that Litvinenko's long and protracted death – which gave him and many other critics of Putin's regime a significant media platform – was ordered by Putin's opponents as a way of discrediting the Russian President. Advocates of this particular theory either claim that Litvinenko was a willing participant in his own death or that he was a convenient dupe in a false flag conspiracy to convince the world that Putin would spare no expense when it came to murdering his rivals.

HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Karl Popper (left) argued that conspiracy theories were irrational. Alex Jones (centre) and David Icke (right) continue to provide evidence that he was probably right.

Whatever the case, you cannot help but be a conspiracy theorist when it comes to the death of Alexander Litvinenko: there is no sensible alternative.

POLITICS AND PARANOIA

The term "conspiracy theory" is typically taken to be pejorative and to refer to a species of irrational belief or system of beliefs. Conspiracy theories are frowned upon in public discourse, despite the fact that we know conspiracies occur. Why are we so sceptical of theories about conspiracies?

In part it's because we keep being told – by people who should know better – that conspiracy theories are bunk. Most of the academic literature on the irrationality of belief in conspiracy theories stems from the work of Sir Karl Popper or Richard Hofstadter. Popper, in the *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1969), characterises belief in conspiracy theories as *prima facie* evidence of irrationality because conspiracy theorists are the kind of people who think history is the result of successive and successful conspiracies. Given that this is not obviously the case, the *conspiracy theory of society*, as Popper dubs it, is obviously false; and thus belief in conspiracy theories is necessarily irrational as well.

Richard Hofstadter, in his *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965), classifies belief in conspiracy theories as being like – but not *exactly* like – paranoia. This is not intended as a clinical diagnosis. Rather, Hofstadter seeks to provide an explanation as to why we are suspicious of belief in conspiracy theories *generally* by showing how they *resemble* paranoid ideation. If we consider paranoid ideation to be irrational, then belief in conspiracy theories should, by analogy, be irrational as well.

Popper and Hofstadter are the grand old men of academic debate about conspiracy theories, and it is fair to say that they have set the terms: conspiracy theories are typically thought of as being irrational. Versions of their theories can be seen in the contemporary work of Cass Sunstein, Daniel Pipes, David Aaronovitch and Mark Fenster. Yet the theories of Hofstadter and Popper are, when you think about them carefully… well, kind of weird. After all, both writers admit that conspiracies occur, and that it is sometimes rational to theorise about them. So, why, then, should we be sceptical of 'conspiracy theories'?

Popper and Hofstadter's interest was in claims of *political* conspiracies, which they thought of as both rare and seldom successful. They wrote at a time when trust in authority was high and public knowledge about political malfeasance was low. Their views are understandable (even if we still think them weird) given the context in which they wrote. To them, talk of conspiracy theories was to be frowned upon because if the public came to believe such theories, its trust in authority would be damaged. However, here and now, with our access to official information and the work of organisations like WikiLeaks, the trusting attitudes of Popper and Hofstadter seem particularly askew; irrational, even. Our trust in political authority has been rightly challenged by our knowledge of what members of influential organisations routinely do. Some of the processes they follow look conspiratorial, and some of the conspiracy theories that governments have pooh-poohed have turned out to be warranted by the evidence.

So, why are we are still so sceptical of conspiracy theories, given what we now know?

WEIRD THEORISTS

Another reason for our scepticism about conspiracy theories might be because we are all familiar with the existence of *weird* conspiracy theorists. From David Icke and his alien, shape-shifting reptiles to Alex Jones and his ideas about the true powers behind the White House, there are an awful lot of writers and media pundits who bring into disrepute the wider class of beliefs we might call 'conspiracy theories'. However, this should not be a reason for thinking that belief in conspiracy theories itself is suspicious or irrational. It would be rather like characterising theism solely with respect to the beliefs of religious fanatics, or atheism solely with those of Richard Dawkins. If we start our analysis with respect to beliefs we are already suspicious of, then we are going to confirm our pejorative take.

Instead, we should focus our attention on the category of conspiratorial activity *in general* – actions taken by plotters in secret towards some end – and ask whether there is a substantial amount of conspiratorial activity that is a) well-evidenced and b) the subject of conspiracy theories. Criminal conspiracies are routinely prosecuted through the courts, for example. If you are historically literate, then you will be aware that history is littered with examples of theories about conspiracies, some of which were warranted. If you consider yourself to be politically literate, then you might even claim that a large amount of contemporary politicking takes place in a conspiratorial mode, whether it be selling a policy to the public, working out when to stage a leadership coup or getting rid of your enemies.

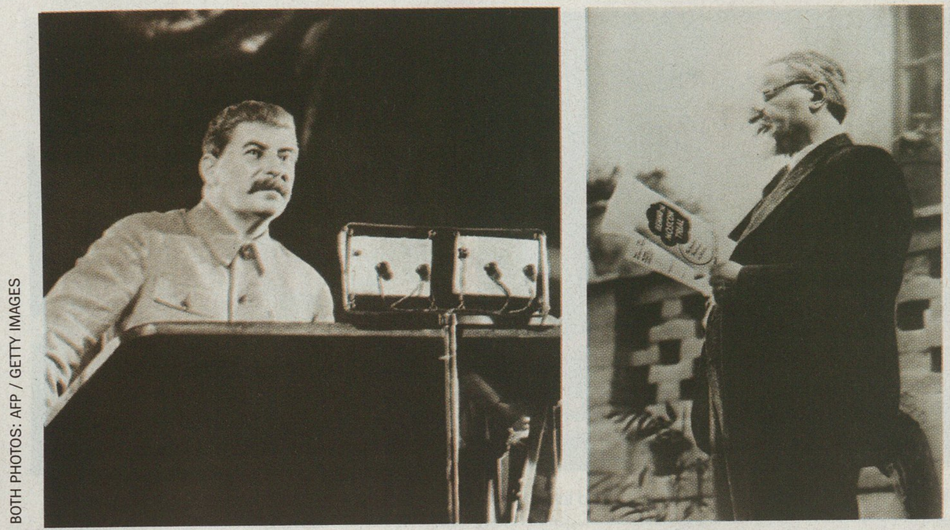
THE MOSCOW TRIALS

When is a conspiracy theory not a conspiracy theory?

When it's not a conspiracy theory according to the accepted wisdom.

Take, for example, the Moscow Trials of the 1930s. Joseph Stalin, then leader of the USSR, was obsessed with the idea that his rival-in-exile Leon Trotksy was conspiring to return to Russia and depose him. When the security police told Stalin there was no evidence of a conspiracy by Trotsky and his sympathisers, Stalin told them to ensure there would be. Thus, over several months, evidence was fabricated and people were "persuaded" to testify in a series of trials that Trotsky was a threat because he was conspiring against the USSR.

The Moscow Trials were public, and thus concerned citizens (admittedly mostly outside of the USSR) pored over the details. John Dewey, a philosopher, educationalist and Trotskyite, formed the *Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (or "The Dewey Commission"). The result of the commission was a report that included the claim that the verdicts in the Moscow Trials were a sham – the result of a conspiracy by senior members of the Communist Party. Stalin and his cronies



BOTH PHOTOS: AFP / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Stalin and Trotsky (perusing a copy of *Behind the Moscow Trial*) in 1937; which was the conspirator?

countered that the Commission's report was a campaign of disinformation (inadvertently coining a term which would prove useful when debating conspiracy theories far into the future). However, after Stalin's death Nikita Kruschev, the new leader of the USSR, admitted that the Dewey Commission was largely right: Stalin *had* wanted the alleged Trotsky sympathisers to be found guilty in order to prove the existence of a (non-existent) conspiracy by Trotsky to return to Russia. Stalin and his cronies were the crazy conspiracy theorists, while the conspiracy theory put forward by the members of Dewey Commission turned out to be warranted.

What are we to make of this? At the time, the Dewey Commission's claims were not just pooh-poohed by the USSR but also by the governments of the US and the UK. Britain and America trusted Stalin's assurances that the trials were free and fair, and thus believed what turned out to be a conspiracy theory. So, was it a mistake to call the Dewey Commission's thesis about the validity of the verdicts in the Moscow Trials a conspiracy theory at the time? This is an awkward question, one which points towards a certain problem with talk of conspiracy theories generally: if we reserve the term to refer only to theories which are, by definition, irrational to believe in, then cases where it later turns out that belief in them was *not* irrational suddenly need explaining in non-conspiracy theory terms. This is the kind of metaphysical trap that Charles Fort would have enjoyed: a conspiracy theory is not a conspiracy theory when it's an official theory about a conspiracy, *even if it was called a conspiracy theory in the first place*.

The moral of the Moscow Trials is that sometimes governments conspire against their citizenry, and that the only viable explanation of that fact is a conspiracy theory. Sometimes, though, governments conspire *with* their unwitting citizenry.

THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM OF THE CIA

When people talk about the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), they tend to think of a secretive group of grey-suited workers who put in long hours, have no hobbies, and spy on almost everyone. However, back in the 1940s, CIA agents were much more eclectic. Some of them liked to drink hard, write novels in their spare time, and collect art. This latter interest led some members of the CIA to develop the "long leash": the secretive funding of artistic endeavours for the purposes of showing that America was culturally superior to its rivals, particularly the USSR, with which it was engaging in a Cold War.

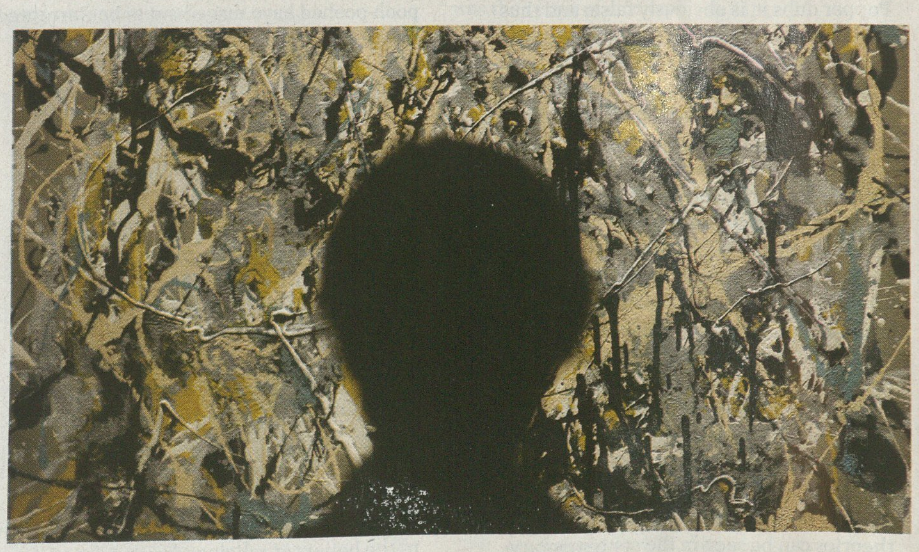
One of the art movements funded in this manner was Abstract Expressionism. The CIA set up fronts to promote the work of painters like Jackson Pollock overseas, for the purpose of valorising American art and culture. It might be tempting, then, to say that Abstract Expressionism was simply part of the CIA's arsenal in the Cold War. However, it's clear that the Abstract Expressionists themselves had no idea that some of their funding – and initial success – came courtesy of the CIA. As far the Abstract Expressionists were concerned, their art was being appreciated on its own merits. Which it was, garnering critical acclaim in the right quarters and being bought by the right institutions. Although the CIA promoted Abstract Expressionism as part of its cultural arsenal in the Cold War, the conspiracy also resulted in the mainstreaming of the Abstract Expressionist art movement *in its own right*. This must have been one of the desired ends of the CIA agents who ran the long leash: the pre-eminence of Abstract Expressionism at that time allowed Americans generally to believe that their own art could compete, culturally speaking, with that of the older European and Soviet nations.

The story of the initial success of Abstract Expressionism shows that conspiracy theories need not be about political affairs with huge ramifications. It also demonstrates that conspiracies themselves need not be necessarily nefarious: the secret patronage of the Abstract Expressionist movement might be the kind of thing we consider suspicious (like most secretive activity) but it is not inherently sinister. The benefit of analysing examples like the long leash is that it allows us to examine the wider category of conspiratorial explanations that are not necessarily sinister (unless you were a Soviet art critic). The long leash, after all, is undeniably an example of a conspiracy. Any theories about it will turn out to be conspiracy theories, including its role in the success of Abstract Expressionism. It just turns out that in this case the conspiracy theories happen to be based upon evidence and are, thus, warranted.

The examples we've looked at – the death of Alexander Litvinenko, the Moscow Trials and the Long Leash – show that conspiracy theories should be taken seriously, no matter what we think about wacky conspiracy theorists like David Icke and Alex Jones. So, what are we to do when more than conspiracy theories collide, as they do with respect to the events of 11 September 2001?

THE 9/11 CONSPIRACY

On 11 September 2001, a terrorist attack destroyed the Twin Towers in New York and damaged the Pentagon in Washington, DC.



AFP / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: The work of Jackson Pollock and other US Abstract Expressionists was promoted overseas by the CIA.

EZRA SHAW / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: The destruction of the Twin Towers: terrorist attack or false flag operation? "Whatever you believe about 9/11, it is likely that you believe a conspiracy theory".

According to most commentators, the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda planned and carried out the attack. However a small but vocal set of conspiracy theorists, most commonly known as the "9/11 Truthers", claims that, variously, the real culprits were either a foreign nation operating under a false flag, or that the attack was carried out on the orders of elements within the government of the USA.

Whatever you believe about 9/11, it is likely that you believe a conspiracy theory. Either Al Qaeda operatives worked in secret to attack mainland America, or some other organisation let the blame fall on Al Qaeda. No matter which theory you believe, it turns out you are a 9/11 conspiracy theorist. What matters here, then, is the evidence you use to justify your choice of conspiracy theory, and this is the general rule for the appraisal of a conspiracy theory: any given conspiracy theory is only as good as the evidence that supports it. If we are going to be sceptical of conspiracy theories, then let that scepticism be based upon arguments as to why particular conspiracy theories are, evidentially, good or bad ones. After all, sometimes our *only* choice is between competing conspiracy theories.

Some will undoubtedly argue that their acceptance of the Al Qaeda theory for the events of 9/11 is not a conspiracy theory because it is now part of orthodox history. However, that gets us back to the metaphysical trap: when is a conspiracy theory not a conspiracy theory? For example, in the moments *between* the attacks on New York on 11 September and Al Qaeda claiming responsibility for the atrocity, *every* theory about the cause of the destruction of the Twin Towers was a conspiracy theory. It was only when Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for it that one of the conspiracy theories was considered most plausible. Prior to that point, people had their suspicions, but they were still suspicions based on the likelihood of one conspiracy theory being more plausible than some other.

CONCLUSION

Why are we so sceptical about conspiracy theories? Why are we so concerned to avoid the label that we often say: "I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but…"?

Conspiracies occur, and no one seems to deny that. Conspiracy theories sometimes turn out to be warranted, although many deny this by saying: "Ah, but then it's not really a conspiracy theory, is it?" Our suspicion about conspiracy theories looks to be, to paraphrase the philosopher Charles Pigden, a modern superstition; or, as Lee Basham puts it, a mark of a kind of civil religion. We have been told that conspiracy theories are bunk, and so we treat them as such. Some conspiracy theorists, like David Icke and Alex Jones, would argue that this is because the people who keep telling us this are the ones with the most to gain. After all, in a world where conspirators can hide behind the line "It's just a conspiracy theory!" much conspiratorial activity will likely go unchecked. Still, even if you do not believe we live in a totally conspiratorial world, it's clear that sometimes the only rational choice is to believe in conspiracy theories. FT

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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A GHOST IN THE (MILKING) MACHINE

There were odd goings-on down on Wilkinson's farm in Tarcutta, New South Wales, back in 1949. **PAUL CROPPER** and **TONY HEALY** investigate the strange case of the haunted cowshed… one that baffled agricultural experts, scientists, magicians and the Australian Prime Minister.

During this remarkable episode a milking machine belonging to dairy farmer Laurence Wilkinson malfunctioned in a weird and dramatic way, its metal pulsator plates repeatedly, inexplicably vanishing and landing up to 250 yards (230m) from the milking shed.

Other objects were seen to levitate. The phenomenon, which persisted for 11 months, was observed and documented by Alexander Portors, an engineer of 30 years' experience, who was very familiar with the machine in question.

The story broke on 19 January 1949, when the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* learned that Portors had asked the newly established Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) for assistance.

When interviewed by the *Advertiser*, Mr Portors said the phenomenon began on 10 January 1949 and had occurred almost every day thereafter. It involved a common five-stand milking machine that had operated normally for several years until, inexplicably, its pulsator plates started to vanish. It always happened so fast that none of the witnesses, not even those who were looking directly at the plates at the critical moment, actually saw them disappear from the machine or exit the shed: one moment they were there, the next they were gone. As most of them were later found on a stony ridge to the north, it was assumed that some mysterious force had caused them to fly out of the shed at phenomenal speed.

A MYSTERIOUS FORCE HAD CAUSED THE PLATES TO FLY OUT OF THE SHED AT HIGH SPEED

The disc-shaped, brass-and-Bakelite plates weighed 13 ounces (368g), were about one and a half inches thick and three inches long (3.8 x 7cm). To exit the shed they would have had to dip downwards to clear the sloping edge of the roof; then, to reach the area where they commonly landed, they would have had to swoop upwards to clear a stockyard fence. On landing, they either buried themselves in the ground or tore two-foot-long, one-inch-deep (60 x 2.5 cm) scars in the earth.

Another strange aspect was that the phenomenon happened regardless of how fast or how slowly the machine was operating, and occurred even when the power was off and it was being turned by hand. Equally strangely, the 'flight' of the plates was absolutely silent.

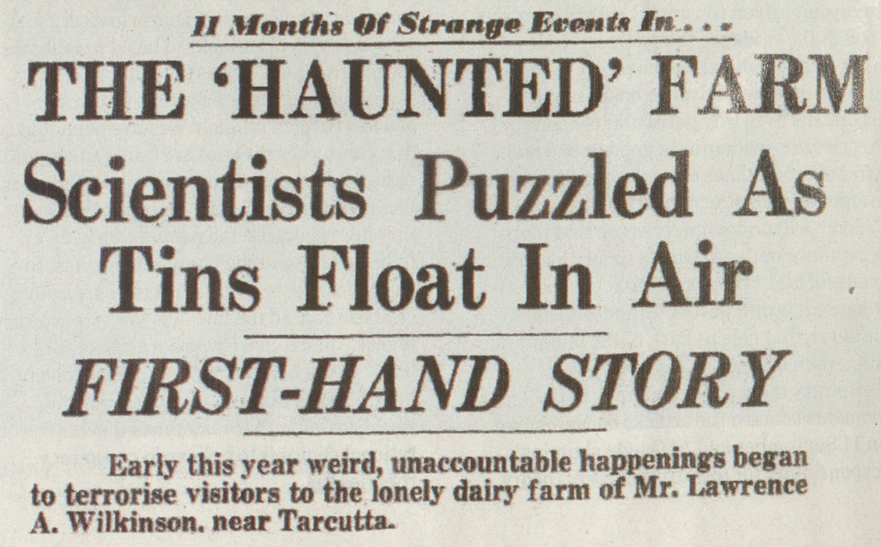
Because they couldn't normally be removed unless the machine was stationary, and then only by manipulating them in a certain way, the plates' behaviour seemed to defy explanation.

Portors claimed that he "could get signatures from 20 adults, sensible men who have seen the phenomenon to swear to it", and several of them did indeed step forward.

Roy Donahue, who owned a similar milking machine, said: "It is impossible, but I saw it happen". Another, Clem Gorman, said: "I saw it, but I wish to God I had not seen it. It is frightening. There's no reason… why this should happen, and I'm a mechanical man… it disturbs me greatly."

Mr Wilkinson's 15-year-old son Robin was on the property throughout most of the episode. On one occasion, three Tarcutta residents watched him touch one of the plates with a short iron rod. The plate suddenly flew from the machine, and at the same time the rod was wrenched from his hand and embedded in the concrete floor. The plate was found about 200 yards (180m) away, embedded in a mud heap and emitting an odour "like that of a burning arc lamp, but [it] was cold when we picked it up." A slight blue haze hung about the spot.

On 18 January, a technician from the company that sold the machine arrived to examine it, and found it worked perfectly. The plates behaved themselves for a few days after that, but if Mr Wilkinson thought his troubles were over he was badly mistaken: on the night of Saturday 22 January, they again flew off "with terrific force".



11 Months Of Strange Events In . . .

THE 'HAUNTED' FARM

Scientists Puzzled As Tins Float In Air

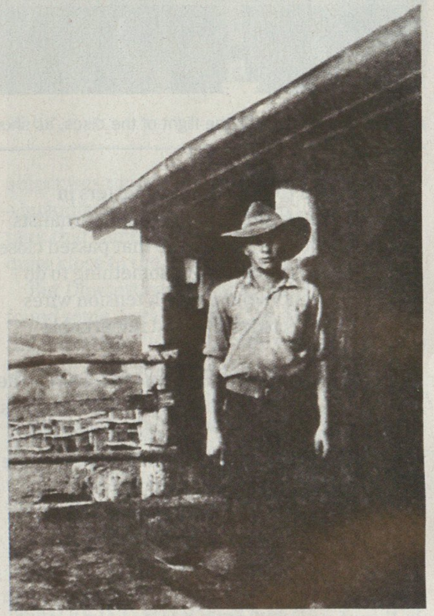
FIRST-HAND STORY

Early this year weird, unaccountable happenings began to terrorise visitors to the lonely dairy farm of Mr. Lawrence A. Wilkinson, near Tarcutta.

ABOVE: The milking shed and sorroundings. **BELOW LEFT:** Dairy farmer Laurence Wilkinson. **BELOW RIGHT:** Mr Wilkinson's 15-year-old son Robin.

In desperation, the flummoxed farmer bolted down the steel bar that kept the plates in position – but they still flew off. He also experimented by cutting the fibre faces off the brass plates and substituting leather, but they were then thrown further than ever. After 10 days of weirdness, he decided the machine was simply too dangerous to use and abandoned it. Despite being handicapped by, as the *Advertiser* put it, "a maimed hand", he resorted to milking his 100 cows manually.

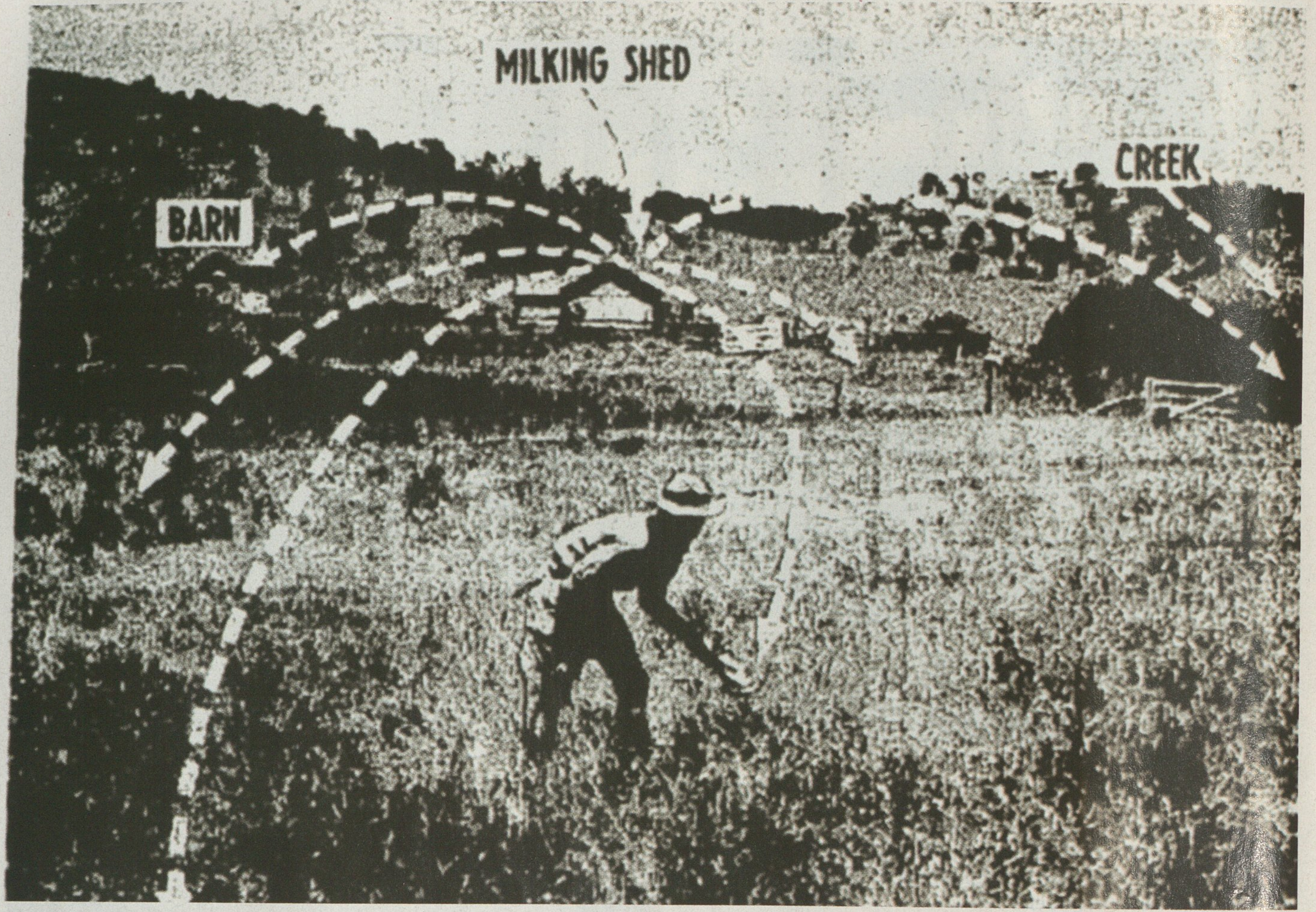
In spite of the technician's report and without bothering to visit Tarcutta to see for himself, LC Thurston, the President of the Dairymens Association, suggested the plates might have been flung away because the



pump was blowing instead of sucking. That idea was quickly scotched by an indignant Portors, who pointed out that if such was the case the phenomenon would hardly be noiseless: "I have been in engineering since 1917 and I know that the milking plant is without any fault. The machine is perfect."

A BOFFIN'S BRUSH-OFF

CSIRO's response to Alexander Portors's appeal was also rather disappointing. Without deigning to leave his office in Canberra, one of the organisation's officers, DT Dickson, suggested that the machine be inspected by a dairy expert (which had, of course, already been done) and by an electrical engineer, who should then send



ABOVE: "Flung to glory": the flight of the discs, as shown in the *Sunday Herald*, 4 December 1949. **BELOW:** Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley was asked to intercede.

their reports to CSIRO headquarters in Melbourne. Mr Dickson also told journalists that a 60,000-volt power line that passed close to the property could have something to do with the phenomenon: "High tension wires sometimes become awry and remarkable things occur."

Portors was furious. The line in question, he pointed out, carried only 33,000 volts and was located 11 miles away. "These people in the cities," he seethed, "are apt to think everyone in the country is a nitwit." He insisted that a force strong enough to hurl metal plates long distances faster than the eye could see obviously warranted official investigation. At no time did he suggest poltergeist activity; he believed, rather, that the plates were hurled by power that was built up by the machine in some way. If scientists could detect the source of the unknown power, he said, the discovery could be of great value to the country. "There's a build-up of power there... [it] is only exerted for a fraction of a second, but the plate picks up tremendous speed, and the momentum carries it on... it is noiseless, too. I've watched for a plate leaving the machine, but could not sight it. It's just so fast you can't see it. Dairy farmers from all around [have come to see] and it has just flung the plates to glory. They've all been... amazed."

CSIRO's suggestions were, he said, "just side-stepping... what we need here is a scientist... but if the experts do not hurry up there will be little or nothing to see. My reaction to the [CSIRO] attitude is one of complete disgust... as luck would have it, the discs so far have not struck anyone. If they did it would mean serious bodily harm, perhaps death."

BEN CHIFLEY LENDS A HAND...

After the inaction of CSIRO and the Dairymen's Association chief, Portors must have been heartened (albeit briefly) by the response of the Federal Member for Hume, Mr Fuller, who, on about 28 January, personally requested the Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, to intercede.

We'd love to report that the PM, a former engine driver, donned his overalls and sped down to the farm to sort things out, but in fact he didn't budge from his desk in Canberra. He did, however, communicate with the town clerk of Tarcutta to "gain the closest impression of the reason why" the plates were flying, and then contacted "high scientists" at CSIRO headquarters in Melbourne. Predictably, however, the "high scientists" ducked the issue again. The matter, they said, was not one for scientists, but for the manufacturers of the milking machine.

As the boffins knew very well that the manufacturers had already found the machine to be faultless, Portors and Wilkinson found this second round of butt-covering particularly galling. The president of Kyeamba Shire, Councillor A O'Brian, shared their frustration: "It seems... they won't send a scientist down here until someone is killed or seriously injured," he said.

So the exhausted Wilkinson was left to cope with the weirdness and run his farm as best he could.

MR DOWSETT'S SOLUTION

What would a good polt event be without a confirmed sceptic making a flying visit to the site and attempting to debunk it?

On 29 January Chartered Engineer JH Dowsett wrote to the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* to say that local residents "may now sleep soundly... for the mystery has been solved".

ABOVE: The milking shed at the centre of the strange phenomena still stands, and is seen here in a photograph from 2010.

He and one or two companions had visited the Wilkinson property the previous Tuesday and satisfied themselves that young Robin Wilkinson was hoaxing the whole thing. But how they came to that conclusion is far from adequately explained.

They arrived some time before the evening milking, examined the machine, which appeared to be working properly and, using a compass and other devices, found nothing unusual about the magnetic deviation and the pull of gravity. The brass pulsator plates were, unsurprisingly, found to be non-magnetic. They were told that during the morning the master plate had flown off and dived into a 6ft (1.8m) tall water tank. Dowsett found that implausible. "Remarkable," he commented sarcastically, but not unreasonably, "how someone knew to look into this tank to find the plate, as they cannot be observed when in actual flight."

He saw that Mr Wilkinson had taken the precaution of covering most of the machinery with wire netting and checked that everything was properly grounded. During all this, he noted, there were two children present: "a boy and a girl, both between about ... nine to 12 years." The boy, in fact, was 15-year-old Robin, who proceeded to round up the cows and help his father attach them to the machine, which began to work perfectly.

But Dowsett was keeping a sharp eye on the lad who "was quite a power in his actions about the dairy, and his eagerness to assist with milking was outstanding; his movements were keenly observed."

"THE WHOLE SITUATION IS FANTASTIC AND IS UTTER ROT..."

The engineer then states, rather oddly, that: "We were all rather puzzled, but had by this time formed our opinions, so we packed up... and started on our journey homewards."

They'd driven only 400 yards (365m) when someone (with, apparently, a particularly loud voice) called them back. On their return they were told a pulsator plate had attempted to fly but had been immediately replaced so that milking could continue. The machine had resumed working normally. Dowsett didn't say where the plate was found, but implies that it was inside the wire netting. He thought this suspicious: if the mysterious force was really strong enough to hurl objects 200 yards (180m), he suggested, then surely it could "drive a plate through wire netting." That doesn't sound entirely unreasonable, until we remember that Dowsett knew full well that Mr Wilkinson had not claimed every object was thrown a great distance. Several – including the one that landed in the water tank that same morning – had been found quite close to the machine.

But Dowsett had made up his mind. Plates found some distance from the dairy, he told the *Advertiser*, "have been thrown or placed in position... the whole situation is fantastic and utter rot." In conclusion, he pointed the finger of blame straight at young Robin: "I suggest that no further trouble will be experienced... after the termination of the present school holidays."

In that and in several other respects, Dowsett was wrong.

MYSTERY UNSOLVED

Far from finishing when Robin returned to school at the end of January, the weird events continued for the next 10 months, including a period of three weeks when he was 87 miles (140km) away in Albury.

By early October, the phenomenon was affecting not only the milking machine, but also the diesel engine that drove it and an auxiliary engine. "All the moveable parts of both engines and milking machines, and also the separator", wrote WA Breaden, Secretary of the Tarcutta and district Progress Association, "have been flung away."

Mr Wilkinson said that one part of the milking machine, weighing 2.5lb (1.1kg) was found 250 yards (230m) from the shed. On one occasion, a cast-iron axle weighing 65lb (30kg) was lifted 2ft (60cm) off the ground with what he described as "a terrific bang".

A *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist who visited the farm in November wrote that: "in an effort to stop the machine from flying to bits, Mr Wilkinson had tied every moving part to the walls and rafters with bits of chain, wire and rope... yet parts of the machine, both moving and stationary, continue to fly about, twisting the heavy dog chains that secure them as if they were soft copper wire."

THEY SAW NOTHING

Given what we know of the notoriously contrary nature of polts, we weren't surprised to learn that whenever Wilkinson and Portors managed to persuade experts to examine it, the machine worked flawlessly.

When dairy inspectors from the NSW Department of Agriculture inspected the machine, they, like the technician from the company who sold the machine, could find no fault with it. Public Works Department engineers also drew a blank.

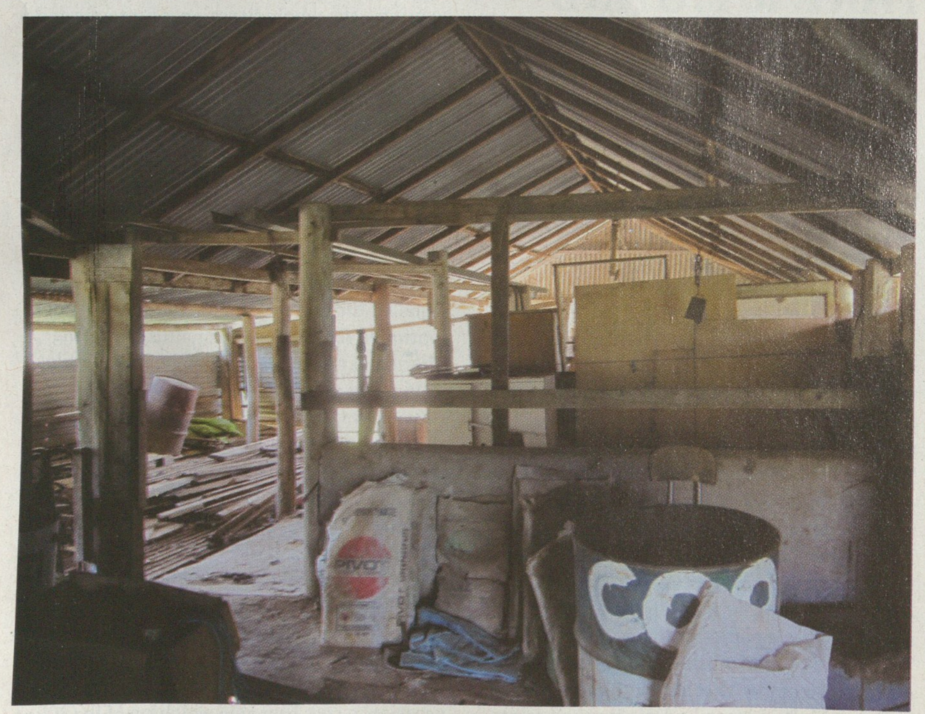
In November, when CSIRO finally bowed to pressure and sent out a couple of scientists, the polt again kept a low profile. In the presence of Roger Morse and Chester Gray, both Electrical and Mechanical engineers, the machine worked perfectly, and Morse, the senior of the two, duly reported that they "were satisfied the occurrences are not related to any new source of energy. It does not appear, therefore, that any scientific investigation, such as this organisation, with its present far from unlimited resources, could undertake, would be of any value in explaining the happenings."

Morse seems to have been intent on coming to a negative conclusion. He dismissed the testimony of the eyewitnesses with the odd remark that they could all have been fooled "by a simple form of conjuring... or by some form of hypnotism," and then took a couple of nasty, gratuitous swipes at the long-suffering Wilkinsons: "Although the boy has been a suspect... Wilkinson himself would have had the opportunity of interfering with the plant... it is quite possible that a psychiatrist might get to the bottom of the matter..."

Pretty damning stuff – until we consider this: Chester Gray revealed later that he had not been in full agreement with his colleague.

Unlike Morse, Gray was very favourably impressed by the eyewitnesses: "We had sworn declarations [from] four people... who made them at considerable hazard to their reputations... we cross-examined [them and other witnesses]... without in any way shaking them, or revealing noticeable flaws or inconsistencies... accordingly these statements constitute unusually powerful authentication of the phenomena reported. I was far less inclined to wipe the whole thing... In my opinion it would have taken a whole coterie of professional magicians... to have brought off the tricks".

> THE BOY TOLD HIM: "NOT MUCH HAPPENS WHEN I'M AWAY"



TOP: Robin Wilkinson, pictured in the *Sunday Herald*, 4 December 1949. **ABOVE:** The milking shed interior.

THEY SAW LOTS

When one reads their compelling testimony, it is easy to see why Gray found it hard to dismiss the eyewitnesses as hoaxers or dupes.

In November 1949 a *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist interviewed Alexander Portors, two other engineers who had visited the dairy repeatedly over the course of 11 months, and eight other eyewitnesses.

As well as witnessing many disappearances of pulsator plates, Portors had watched an empty grease tin lift from the top of the machine's vacuum pump and "rise slowly in the air... spinning as it rose. It cleared a 6ft [1.8m] foot wooden partition with 18 inches [46cm] to spare, then turned and fell with terrific force to the ground about 18 inches from where I stood. A peculiar thing about it was that it seemed much bigger than it really was – as big as a football. I suppose that was because it was spinning diagonally. We were so astonished we thought we'd see what happened to an empty 50-cigarette tin. We put it on... the vacuum pump. A minute or two later it also rose over the 6ft partition."

Another mechanical engineer, RV Donahue, and his daughter Veronica witnessed those amazing events. Veronica told the journalist that she was standing beside her father and Mr and Mrs Portors, "when I saw the grease tin rise in the air and crash at my feet with a loud bang. I got a terrible fright."

Donahue also witnessed the sudden disappearance of several pulsator plates: "One moment they were there, the next moment they were gone."

One day, Edward Brown helped Portors examine the plates, and "made sure they were fixed firmly on... then started up the engine. Suddenly the master pulsator flew off... we had a look at the other pulsators and found two of them were missing."

A radio and electrical engineer, Mr R Mumford, provided the journalist with some particularly interesting observations: "When I first heard about the strange events... I didn't believe them, but thought I'd go and see for myself." He visited the dairy about 20 times, sometimes spending entire weekends there.

"I was with the party who saw the grease tin and cigarette tin rise in the air, but there were many other remarkable experiences. I once kept the master pulsator block... under observation for four hours. Suddenly I became aware it had gone. We found it later 50 yards away in the paddock.

"One Sunday... I saw the lid of a cream can lift itself off the creamery shelf, rush through the air and strike the opposite wall. No one was present... but myself. *Mr Wilkinson's boy was in the cottage 100 yards away* [our italics].

"It's impossible to explain these things by any known law. I've thought of magnetic deflection and electrical interference, and at one time I made a lot of... tests with instruments I brought to the farm for the purpose, but all... proved nothing. It's the biggest mystery I've ever experienced."

MAGIC MOMENTS

The *Herald* also reported the findings of someone who had interviewed young Robin Wilkinson. The man in question was a stage magician – a member of the Magic Circle of London. "When I went to [the] dairy", he stated, "I had two things to settle in my mind. Was the rampaging milking machine in a state of neglect and disrepair? And was there any loophole for trickery? The answer to the first question was patently 'No'".

Nor could he believe Mr Wilkinson was a hoaxer: the farmer "is too stolid and hard-working... to want to play tricks on himself. The continued disintegration of his machine has imposed a tremendous physical strain upon him and reduced his nervous system to a wreck."

The man then focused his attention on young Robin, "a strong, healthy boy of 15, obviously interested in machinery, always doing odd jobs in the dairy". While the sceptical Mr Dowsett had thought it suspicious that the boy was "the indefatigable retriever of missing engine parts", this investigator, noting that the lad was miles from the farm when some phenomena occurred, was "convinced Robin intentionally was not responsible for these strange goings-on."

"Yet," he continued, "it was the boy... who gave me a clue. He said, in answer to my question: 'Not much happens when I'm away.'

"Nearly all poltergeist phenomena occurs in the presence of a human agent, usually an adolescent boy or girl... I think it reasonable that the absurd happenings at Wilkinson's farm are of poltergeist origin and that the human agent... is Mr. Wilkinson's son."

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

As we can find no newspaper articles about the "haunted cow shed" dated later than January 1950, it seems likely the polt activity eased off as the New Year began. One document in our file, however, hints that strange events occurred occasionally until at least 1956.

As mentioned above, one of the CSIRO scientists, Chester M Gray, was never completely happy with the negative report lodged by his colleague Roger Morse after their visit to Tarcutta in November 1949. So it is very interesting that, when he retired in 1971 after a long and distinguished career, he "decided to follow up the investigation, to the extent that this was possible after so long a time."

Consequently, between 1973 and 1975 he corresponded with senior officers at CSIRO, the National Library and the Australian Archives, seeking copies of all relevant documents, particularly statutory declarations of eyewitnesses, as well as copies of several photographs he'd taken on the farm.

In one letter he gives a brief account of his return visit to the site in January 1975: "I... found, against all expectations, that the principal *dramatis personae* were still going strong... with Mr Breaden I... obtained from Mr. Wilkinson and his wife information about *what transpired, allegedly, in the seven years or so following my previous visit* [our italics]."

While Gray "was particularly impressed by the simple, unreserved words of Mrs Wilkinson," he found her husband "very secretive about certain important aspects." Sceptics might find his reticence significant, but perhaps the farmer was just sick to death of scientists and media attention. Or perhaps, after belatedly accepting that something paranormal really *was* lurking about the farm, he was reluctant to talk for fear of stirring it up.

Despite Wilkinson's reticence, Gray did not "despair of obtaining further cooperation" and believed the strange phenomena to be genuinely paranormal. Declaring that "the main lines of the story are now fairly clear," he resolved to write a full account of his investigations for the London-based Society for Psychical Research (SPR).

It would have been very interesting to learn what he was referring to when he alluded to events that "transpired, allegedly, in the seven years after [1949]". Unfortunately, however, as the SPR has no record of receiving his report, it seems that, for some reason or other, he never got around to sending it.

ROBIN'S END

As we didn't become aware of the Tarcutta mystery until 2010, we have been able to locate only one member of the Wilkinson family. Although she was at the farm during parts of 1949, the lady, who requests anonymity, was then very young and has forgotten most of what transpired – it was "just a part of life".

She did, however, tell us that although she visited Robin Wilkinson regularly in later years, they never once talked about the strange events of 1949. Robin, she said, was never chatty – he often "clammed up". He lived in Junee and died there in 2002.

A good feature of the Wilkinson case is that it involved plenty of eyewitnesses, but, because of its location, not too many. In some other cases, excessive numbers of sightseers have made it difficult to decide whether or not hoaxing was involved.

After one brief visit to the property, Mr Dowsett asserted that the phenomena were being faked, but there is very little, if anything, to suggest he was right. He seemed to think that the mere fact that he was suspicious of young Robin was enough to prove that the entire series of events was "utter rot". Roger Morse of the CSIRO, after a similarly brief visit, also suggested hoaxing and implied Mr Wilkinson was responsible. But three other professional engineers and many knowledgeable locals, who spent a great deal more time on the site than either Dowsett or Morse, and who'd actually witnessed the phenomena, stoutly defended the Wilkinsons.

One would expect that if hoaxing was involved a highly trained conjurer would be able to detect it. Yet the stage magician who visited in October 1949 concluded that no such hoaxing had occurred.

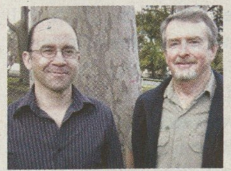
Because stormy weather has been associated with poltergeist activity during several other notable episodes it may be significant that the only time pulsator plates disappeared completely was during a severe storm on 25 January 1949. Three of them disappeared that night and the remaining two vanished three days later. Although the Wilkinsons searched "until they were footsore" they never found a trace of them.

It is interesting to note that although other people suggested something supernatural was going on at his farm, Laurence Wilkinson strongly resisted the notion. Like his stoutest supporter, Alexander Portors, he clung to the idea that the phenomena, though extremely weird, were the result of some undiscovered natural force.

As we know, Portors thought that the force – if only the government could harness it – would be a great boon for mankind. Given his engineering background and apparent unfamiliarity with poltergeist lore, his materialist "take" on the situation was not unreasonable. The episode had, after all, occurred just four years after the general public was made rudely aware of the awesome, almost incomprehensible power of the atom.

To us, however, it is pretty clear that for some reason or other a poltergeist really did decide to raise Merry Hell in the Wilkinsons' cow shed. FT

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



PAUL CROPPER and **TONY HEALY** have investigated all manner of strange phenomena both in Australia and elsewhere since the mid-1970s. they are the co-authors of *Out of the Shadows: Mystery Animals of Australia* (1994) and *The Yowie* (2006).

SOURCES

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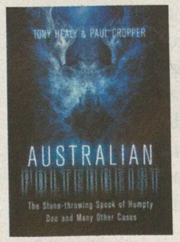

TONY HEALY & PAUL CROPPER
AUSTRALIAN
POLTERGEIST
The Stone-throwing Spook of Humpty Doo and Many Other Cases

This article was extracted and adapted from *Australian Poltergeist* by Tony Healy and Paul Cropper, published by Xou Pty Ltd and available from Amazon in print and Kindle versions.

NEIL JORDAN

SEARCHING IN DREAMS

ANGELINE B ADAMS and **REMCO VAN STRATEN** discuss fantasy and film-making with writer/director Neil Jordan at a 20th annniversary screening of his *Interview with the Vampire*

GETTY IMAGES

We're ushered into the blood-red cave that is Screen 4 of Belfast's Strand Arts Centre, the only survivor in a city that once boasted myriad neighbourhood cinemas. "I wish I had a cinema like this within walking distance in Dublin," Neil Jordan confides. The occasion is the 20th anniversary screening of *Interview with the Vampire*. It'll be shown in 35mm, not digital. Jordan prefers it this way.

When did you last see *Interview*?
Oh, it was a long, long, looooooong time ago!

Your first film work was as creative consultant on John Boorman's *Excalibur*. Were you already interested in the fantastic earlier, in your writing career?
No, not really. It came from making movies. Fantastic things always suit movies, it seems to me. And I probably got it from the area where I grew up; I grew up in Sligo, was born in Sligo. But I've also written several novels involving the fantastic as well – fantasy, folklore and mythology.

And when you work with someone else's stories?
Whenever I work with someone else's stories it's always because they've had those elements in them. Angela Carter, Graham Greene, Moira Buffini, Anne Rice... I've always been attracted to a book, or a story, or a piece of imagination that had that strange kind of existence, both in this world and some other world.

Do you find that you can then further influence them?
Yes, I choose the stories that then stimulate my soul in some way, and then I respond to them, and I change them often. But I choose something that has that resonance.

Compared to the many adaptations of King Arthur, not much has been done in film and TV with our Irish mythology.
I know, there's not really much, is there?

> "IT'S SOMETHING THAT COMES FROM GROWING UP IN AN ORAL CULTURE"

For instance, with the popularity of *Game of Thrones*, filmed around Belfast, where is our epic Cú Chulainn movie?
I don't know why they haven't made movies of it. There's no big fiction about Cú Chulainn either, apart from the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. If it's ever referred to, it's in terms of satire, like in Flann O'Brien.

Also, as a character, Cú Chulainn may not be as enigmatic as King Arthur.
I suppose Cú Chulainn's is not as magical a story, really; it's not about the Otherworld. I mean, it's not about Christianity either – it's a pre-Christian story. It's more like the *Iliad* and those Greek epics. The thing is, with the Arthurian legends, you have various renditions of them since the 13th century, from *Le Morte d'Arthur* onwards, and they have a different position within English literature.

Do you relate to writers like Yeats, who formed a bridge between ancient history, mythology, and modern Ireland?
Yes, absolutely. That's the reason I've done so many movies that have dealt with fairy tales, with fantasy, horror and ghost stories and things like that. But it's something that comes from growing up very much in an oral culture, with that kind of storytelling and that kind of culture – superstition was never very far from the surface.

The entire Anglo-Irish literary revival was driven by people collecting folk tales, like An Cumann Le Béaloideas Éire (The Folklore of Ireland Society), Lady Gregory, Yeats of course, and Douglas Hyde. There was the exploration of the Irish folk culture at the very birth of the Anglo-Irish literary revival and the Celtic Twilight.

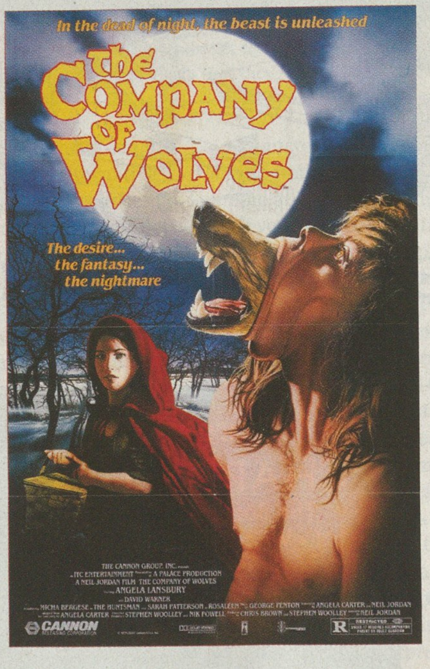
So it's been identity-forming for you?
Yeah. I think it forms every Irish writer in many ways, like Seamus Heaney, Flann O'Brien. But less so at present, because fiction has become more realistic.

And more urban? Have rural settings and mythology lost their influence on Irish storytelling?
Well, you do see them used in comic verse and by various playwrights like Brian Friel, and in a lot of the poetry. But there are cities now, aren't there, and there's violent crime, and thrilling things that contemporary fiction loves, and those are the things to write about. *(He sighs.)*

Though in your realistic films, like *Breakfast on Pluto* and *The Butcher Boy*, you put elements of fantasy, escapism, and also use the idea of dreams a lot, like in *In Dreams*.
Hmmm, yeah. I do love to. And I've done that more in films than in the books I've written because films are almost perfect for exploring dreams and dream images. And I tend to be a very image-centric person. When I write a script I basically close my eyes and daydream. So it's that kind of thing that leads to what I do.

And your movie *Ondine* of course, while not a fantastical movie, has...
It's a fairy tale, basically, yes. With *Ondine* I really wanted to make a specifically Irish fairy tale, so I took the story of the selkie and all the legends of seals and people going backwards and forwards, and tried to situate it in the modern world.

But the fantasy is underpinned by reality.
That was the intention.


In the dead of night, the beast is unleashed
The Company of Wolves
The desire... the fantasy... the nightmare
THE CANNON GROUP, INC.
ITC ENTERTAINMENT
A PALACE PRODUCTION
A NEIL JORDAN FILM THE COMPANY OF WOLVES
ANGELA LANSBURY
DAVID WARNER
CANNON
R

Fantasy archetypes are most obvious in *The Company of Wolves*. You wrote it together with Angela Carter?
I did. She had written a collection of stories, *The Bloody Chamber*, with her own specific treatment of classic fairy tales. Among them *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Bluebeard* and several other tales from the canon of fairy tales.

I got together with her, and we decided to try to construct a story in which other stories could appear. So we used the conceit of the grandmother telling stories to the little girl and within those stories, you have stories within stories. So, that way we managed to make a journey through a significant amount of archetypal fairy tales, all within a reworking of the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Did that give you freedom?
It was a wonderful opportunity to create every kind of crazed image one ever had, you know, put every kind of obsessive image from your fantasies and dreams on the screen.

And that was a delightful thing to do, and in terms of the cinema of the time it was quite unusual, because it was seen as quite daring. The script was quite – it wasn't for little children, it wasn't for adults, it was a horror movie, it was an erotic movie, with a young girl growing up, so it crossed all these boundaries. I was very lucky to get to make it, and it would be very difficult to at present.

Is there a deeper truth to fairy tales?
I think what you find with fairy tales is that they're stories that go beyond character, that go straight to some rather mythic, archetypal thing. And they get there very easily, while if you write a story yourself it's often very difficult to get there. That's the advantage, the function of fairy tales.

Does that let you communicate a message?
It's not a message, really. Fairy tales come fully formed, and they strike deeper than the realistic level, the realistic surface that people are used to. That's why I use fairy tales so much.

What attracted you to directing *Interview with the Vampire*?
It was the fact that vampires had never been taken seriously, and Anne Rice said: "Okay, if there is this creature that lives forever and has no pity, and lives on blood – what would it be like to be that creature?" I don't think anybody had ever really asked that question in a piece of fiction before. I know Bram Stoker didn't, as he presented Dracula as this outside force.

And the other thing was that it was a really intense and exhaustive exploration of some kind of guilt that she had, and I felt that was extraordinary. She places these vampire figures in this realm in which they can question all sorts of different aspects of human life, our presumption of our moral responsibility, what it would be like to live forever, and sexuality, because she decided to write from the point of view of this undead creature. It allowed her to ask all these interesting questions, and I wanted to make a movie about it.

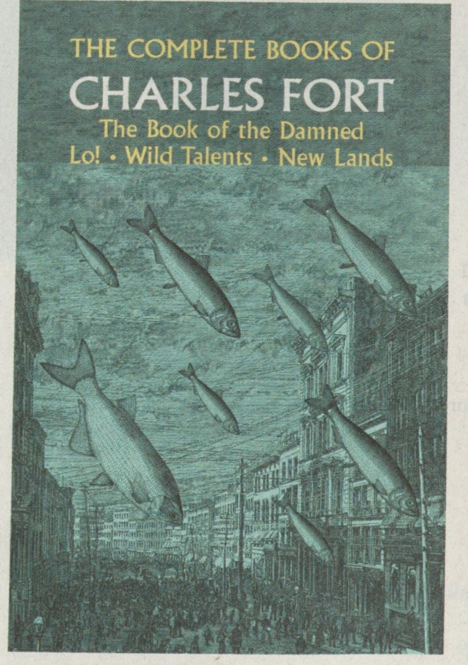
Your work has that recurring motif of characters questioning themselves and their world.
I suppose I do return to the same things in the movies I've made. I varied from the very realistic films like *The Brave One*, *Angel*, *The Crying Game* and between the fantastic things, things that have to do with otherworldly things, like my last movie *Byzantium*, like *Ondine* and *The End of the Affair* – so I go from one to the other. But I do like stories that question the realistic explanations of the world.

I regard stories as a series of questions, or rather as the possibility of asking a series of questions about everything – like "why are we here?" or *(chuckles)* "what am I doing in this room at this moment?" Reality always surprises you, and I like to come up with stories that ask those questions. FT

The Fortean Times Random Dictionary of the Damned

compiled by the Hierophant's Apprentice

No 59: REFLECTIONS ON FORTEANISM



"I have taken the stand that nobody can be always wrong, but it does seem to me that I have approximated so highly that I am nothing short of a negative genius," wrote Charles Fort in *Wild Talents*. In *Lo!*, he had said: "I believe nothing. I have shut myself away from the rocks and wisdoms of ages, and from the so-called great teachers of all time, and perhaps because of that isolation I am given to bizarre hospitalities… I believe nothing of my own that I have ever written." Putting these two remarks side by side leaves one in much the same place as when trying to pick the bones out of the old riddle: "This sentence is a lie." Fort is famously slippery about his own convictions – except perhaps when ranting at astronomers in *New Lands*, but even that extended exercise in selective prejudice may have been a pose, another mask designed to provoke. Perhaps we do catch a glimpse of the uncamouflaged Fort in that book, when he remarks: "The ideal state is meekness, or humility, or the semi-invalid state of the old. Year after year I am becoming nobler and nobler. If I can live to be decrepit enough, I shall be a saint." Yet even then he cannot resist booby-trapping his precept.

We raise the question of Fort's evasiveness – which some might call modesty – less to launch an inevitably fruitless excavation of 'what Fort really thought' than, by way of introduction to these reflections, to raise the question of what relation forteans and forteana today bear to the Master's interests and outlook. There were reputedly anomalous phenomena that he refused to go near – perhaps most notably the manifestations of the séance room, which he clearly suspected were factitious. By association, one presumes, he had comparatively little to say about hauntings, and not a lot to offer on what's now called cryptozoology, which had not in his day become a cottage industry or branch of tourism.

These subjects feature unblushingly in the pages of the distinguished organ you hold in your hands, however: almost anything that's not supposed to happen sits side by side with the staple oddities that Fort reported (or of which he reported reports): such as spontaneous human combustion, weird weather, giants and fairies, poltergeist attacks, and absolutely not excluding that fortean archetype, falls of fish (finned or shelled, but not yet tinned, as far as we know) from an allegedly clear blue sky. This evolution outward from Fort's original core of 'damned data' is scarcely surprising. In any case Fort's interests, as published, were in a sense arbitrary and accidental, in the sense that one measures a circle beginning anywhere: his data could initially have been mined from or, had he had world enough and time, led him to, any of the *bricolage* of phenomena that gather under the umbrella of 'forteana' today – although monstrous births and strange deaths, unless lassoed by some strange synchronicity, seem unlikely candidates for his attention.

Fort displayed no interest, and modern forteans evince hardly any either, in the claims of healers and alternative medicine. This makes a rare contrast with organized scepticism, which can hardly get enough of the stuff to gnash over and denounce. Forteans seem little interested, too, in astrology, which a certain brand of sceptic also loves to fetishise. But then one could argue that alternative medicine is just that: the only 'anomaly' in its various branches is that it works (when it does), and – if one discounts placebo effects – not according to the conventions of Western medical science. Besides, most species of alternative medicine are systematised in one way or another: they have an internal logic and consistency, often accrued over centuries. Likewise astrology, which honest modern practitioners are careful to distinguish from fortune telling or scrying the future, speaking soberly of 'potentials of the moment' and so on: if it makes any difference. And it can hardly be denied that a sizzling case of spontaneous human combustion does rather outshine the intricacies of acupuncture when it comes to instant weird-appeal.

ETIENNE GILFILLAN

ABOVE: Forteans, not 'skeptics', in the pub: "Inappropriate earnestness tends not to be their most obvious vice. Forteans seem implicitly to realise that there is something inherently a bit comical about wondering *about* the things that they wonder *at*." A scene from the UnCon 2011 pub quiz and cabaret.

This is a crucial point. Many a po-faced thing has been said about Fort and his works, but it's not often enough said (or perhaps recognised) that he was also an entertainer. Perhaps primarily so, which would explain a lot. This *Dictionary* has pointed more than once at Fort's occasional elasticity with known facts in the service of hyping a sense of mystery. But he is rarely dull, and no slouch at raising a smile. Whereas in perusing both hardline debunker/denialist writings and the effusions of true believers one soon notices that there is not much lightness of heart at these opposing ends of the anomalistic spectrum. Fort and forteans have their quirks and foibles, but inappropriate earnestness tends not to be their most obvious vice. Forteans seem implicitly to realise that there is something inherently a bit comical about wondering *about* the things that they wonder *at*. For the fortean, the never-ending stream of theories as to (for instance) how the ancient Egyptians built pyramids, or how to account for encounters with fairies, or what made anyone ever think there was a reptile pootling around in Loch Ness, exude the faint aroma of a knobbly-knee contest at a holiday camp. But with no more mockery involved than you'd have found at Butlin's in 1954. There is an element in the fortean outlook that is charmed by forays into supposedly final explanations – forteans know that, as with No 88 buses on Notting Hill Gate, if they wait long enough another three will trundle up in a bunch—and treat them as part of the wondrousness of the phenomenon itself.

This shouldn't be taken to mean that forteans would prefer not to be bothered with explanations – far from it. It's part of the fun that any proffered explanation may flop toward the narrowly super-rational ('alien abduction experiences are the byproduct of sleep paralysis') or collapse into the shamelessly barking ('alien abductors are in cahoots with the Zionist Illuminati'). For forteans, the weirdness of any given alleged anomaly is only enhanced by the attempts, reasoned or otherwise, to deal with it. Or tame it, if you prefer. Particularly strained 'explanations' from persons with more *amour propre*, not to say bloated self-importance, than a Maine Coon only add to the pleasure of the whole. Hence the 'Journal of Strange Phenomena', as FT used to style itself, entertains (the word, from Latin, means literally 'to hold between') treatments of said strange phenomena that range from merciless debunking to swivel-eyed absurdity (copiously footnoted, of course, either way: one must at least *look* respectable). And in that sense the spirit of Fort lives on.

Forteanism, one might conclude, is a kind of intellectual spectator sport – dogging at Paranormal Park, as it were. Like all generalisations, this one isn't entirely true. Individual fortean researchers may be tireless in pursuit of what they conclude is the truth behind a reported anomaly, *and* defensive of their conclusions, wherever on the belief/disbelief spectrum they may lie. But that they choose to publish in fortean contexts rather than (say) the *Skeptical Inquirer* or *Nexus* indicates a tolerance of the whole gamut of anomalies and an interest in the variety of responses to them. This makes for an overall picture that is somewhat Anglican in character – hieratic, scented and colourful at one end, severe and austere at the other, but largely polyphonic throughout, acknowledging the same communion, but perhaps a bit thin on theology these days.

This makes it possible to stand outside the orthodoxies of both belief and scepticism when contemplating fortean phenomena. It's not necessary to *vote* on such a proposition as, for instance, 'Zachariah Sitchin is a fraud'. That large numbers of people appear to have thought Sitchin was the real scholarly deal, on the other hand, becomes fair game; and scrutinising his appeal to such folk may naturally drive, or draw, an analysis of what he wrote, and why it is such utter tosh. Which is a rather different thing from declaring that Sitchin and all his ilk should be denounced, and his effusions anathematised, lest the civilised world descend into the Chaos and Cold Night of irrational supersition.

That is the scarcely unspoken fear of the militant wing of scepticism: as George Hansen pointed out many years ago (see: www.tricksterbook.com/ArticlesOnline/CSICOPoverview.pdf; and also **FT148:40-44 and FT149:42-46**), this kind of *soi-disant* scepticism is full of semi-apocalyptic proselytising zeal; and we would add that it is scientistic, not scientific, to boot. As we've said many times before, science is a fine and awe-inspiring enterprise

PATRICK AVENTURIER / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Waiting for the End. "There was certainly a high tide of irrationality and absurdity in the run-up to the so-called 'end of the Mayan calendar' in 2012, just as there had been in the final years of the last millennium; and the excitement seemed quite widespread." An apocalyptic scene from Bugarach.

that may boast of extraordinary achievements, but no sane scientist would pretend that it can explain everything in human experience, or should even try. It is scientism to claim that it does or could and anyway ought to, and that what is not 'scientifically' verifiable should be industriously disregarded. Possibly even censored.

As for the militants' fear – what with all these people taking poltergeists and telepathy and whatnot seriously – that civilisation is about to drown in a flood of loopiness, experience powerfully suggests otherwise. There was certainly a high tide of irrationality and absurdity in the run-up to the so-called 'end of the Mayan calendar' in 2012, just as there had been in the final years of the last millennium; and the excitement seemed quite widespread. But in neither case did any distress at the failure of prophecy result in an outbreak of general woe, madness or even the weeniest of riots. Those of us who had hoped for parades of flagellants down Fifth Avenue were sorely disappointed. While on the face of it this would suggest that, actually, not many people had expected very much from either apocalypse, it might equally well suggest that people in general are not entirely stupid and are (a) quite capable of admitting they were wrong to have worried so (if they did), and/or (b) able to compartmentalise the speculative bits (shall we call them) of life away from the daily grind, in which being rational is merely a sensible strategy for survival. Most of us, after all, probably read the astrology columns in magazines, maybe even give them some passing credence, but take no practical notice of them whatever.

Besides: people have always been prone to 'believe in' weird stuff, and civilisation marches onward and upward regardless. It can convincingly be argued that the kind of calm, lofty, urbane reasonableness that was deemed a cardinal virtue during the English and Scottish Enlightenments – also known as the Age of Reason – of the late 17th and 18th centuries was a desperate reaching for peace and sanity after two centuries of civil uproar, most of it based in religious differences, and accompanied by no shortage of gratuitous bloodshed. Men of the Enlightenment disdained 'enthusiasms' as not merely *infra dig*, but potentially dangerous, for they had seen where they might lead. Logic, reason, disinterestedness, control of passion, *politeness* – these are indeed virtues, and to them we owe the technological conveniences and store of scientific knowledge we have today. But control of passion is not the same as lack of passion. The arts, and indeed the politics, of the period hardly lack fervent conviction, rage, outrage, or fiendish humour. This was also a golden age for satire, let's not forget. And the survival among the mass of people of all manner of superstition, strange beliefs and pagan practices continued regardless. Quite often these traditions were channels and repositories of wisdom, arrived at over generations, and accrued by officially 'uneducated' people. It's not beyond the capacity of the apparently irrational to be an expression of intelligence. This is as true now, if in different ways, as it was before literacy became general. Such lore tends, however, to body forth in symbols and metaphors rather than in abstract language. That being so, ambiguity is intrinsic to this oblique, quasi-poetic way of articulating experience.

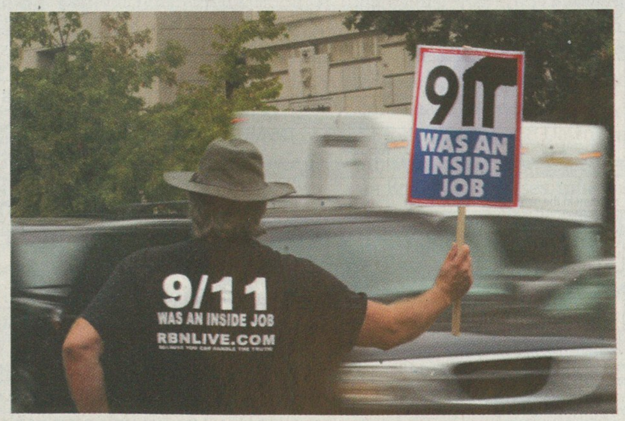
All this seems to have passed militant scepticism by, and one can't help wondering if some of its more dour and strident exponents have much acquaintance with cultural history, or have even bothered to look at anything that might be called art, never mind at the devious ways in which art operates. This kind of sceptic seems to recoil from ambiguity, and the sad fact is that the Enlightenment ideal of striving for logic and reasonableness – while accepting the rôle of the seemingly *un*reasonable – has become warped into a dogmatic rejection of (almost) everything but what is material and therefore dissectable. Such a position is at odds with human experience, but it's defensible – as long as it stays within its own self-set bounds. If the strict materialist doesn't accept the existence or importance of the non-material or the liminal, then he or she should, *strictly*, have little or nothing to say about it or about those whom it enchants. But that's not the way the world works either.

Not that one doesn't sympathise, to an extent. If fortean phenomena are 'damned', and thus excluded from mainstream discourse, then it's not a great step to wondering if that exclusion isn't inspired by some ulterior, even malign motive. Fort himself was ever so slightly prone to paranoid conspiracy thinking (see DoD17: **FT223:51–53**), but it's now a mainstream preoccupation. About a third of US citizens think that 9/11 was an inside job, for instance. That tells us more about the suspicion and contempt with which the powers-that-be are held (and about a widespread sense of helplessness), than it does about 9/11, and one can see why debunkers become determined to demolish this kind of fantasy. At the same time conspiracies are classic fortean territory: and the weirder the better. This example, 'explaining' that both the atom bomb and the subsequent nuclear power industry was a Jewish hoax (there is much more detail at www.sciforums.com/showthread.php?t=65869) is irresistible in its creepy crankiness:

> *The pilot of the B-29 they said dropped the so-called atom bomb on Hiroshima is a known Hollywood insider and his B-29 crew was totally segregated on an island with the pilot Commander Tibbits [sic] fully in charge of security and everything. He had full autonomy and discretion. I believe his crew of talmudic cowards was near 200 aircraft when they sortie'd on Hiroshima then later on Nagasaki. Another brilliant example of the secrecy and security shroud of compartmentalization over the whole hoax. Why would this dumbass put his mother's name on an instrument of utter genocide if it were not that his mother gloats without end at jewish [sic] hoax accomplishments and mass murder that she would be pleased to figure prominently on the nose of that beast of destruction and mass murder. How can anyone believe such a mess of contradictions when it is obvious they would have been nuts not to exploit the means they had at their disposal under those circumstances. They pulled it off while everyone on earth was in a state of shock and would have believed anything the jews [sic] said just to stop the ignited gasoline showers?*

Like the imaginings of 9/11 'Truthers', this is alternate history – except that it's not intended to be speculative, but to be taken as fact, happening now. This sets it apart from the mediæval vision of "an enchanted world in which the boundaries of the imagination and factuality are constantly shifting" as Carrolly Erickson described it (see DoD52: **FT306:46-49**), and in which unicorns are as real as rabbits (well, *aren't* they?). Conspiracists don't move seamlessly from one realm of reality to another: they inhabit a wholly different one from the rest of us. Their world's intricate but imaginary nature, however, places it in a kind of limbo, inextricable from the official (or real) world but apart from it. The boundaries of conspiracy enthusiasts do constantly shift, indeed may be utterly blurred – but internally, as it were. So much so that notions of 'the truth' may overlay one another rather than lie side-by-side as alternative hypotheses: research published in 2011 by Michael J Wood and others showed that those who believed Princess Diana faked her own demise tended *simultaneously* to believe she was murdered; and that "the more participants believed that Osama Bin Laden was already dead when US special forces raided his compound in Pakistan, the more they believed he is still alive." (See http://images.derstandard.at/2012/02/22/Dead%20and%20Alive.pdf).

This places conspiracy theory in fortean territory twice over: there is the standard binary, or option, of true/not true (and variously believed or disputed), and the more radical one of an autonomous *Weltanschauung* that self-consciously distinguishes itself from consensus reality. One of the signs of this distinction is its intellectual obduracy. It is impossible (we've tried) to argue a conspiracist out of a given interpretation of events. This is one sign of the True Believer everywhere, including the debunking zealot, of course. It's most obvious among conspiracy mongers because conspiracy theory, as a whole, is like a sponge: it soaks up everything and anything, as it must, because nothing we're 'officially' told is true. Its nearest relation among forteana is ufology, which has taken on board its phantom ET spacecraft virtually every other fortean phenomenon, from telepathy to telekinesis to 'alternative' healing. And True Believing ufologists don't engage even with sympathetic sceptics from the broader ranks of the field. For example: Stanton Friedman has smugly insisted, over four decades or so of proclaiming "Flying Saucers are *Real!*", that the 'aliens' who 'abducted' Betty & Barney Hill were 'proven' to have been natives of a planet orbiting Zeta Reticuli. His authority was the star model, based on Betty Hill's sketch of an alien star map, laboriously produced by Marjory Fish. Using the latest available data from the HIPPARCOS satellite, Brett Holman more than somewhat demolished the 'Fish model' (and with it Friedman's case) in 2008 in these very pages (**FT242:50-52**). Publicly challenged several times since, by UFO believers and debunkers alike, to modify his stance, Friedman has ignored them all and was still peddling his favourite factoid as recently as May 2014 (see: www.theufochronicles.com/2014/05/UFO-BOOK-REVIEW-the-intellectual-bankruptcy-of.html).



NICHOLAS KAMM / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: "About a third of US citizens think that 9/11 was an inside job".

There are many other instances of such intransigence within ufology: consider the sacred status among believers of such thoroughly debunked cases as Roswell, Rendlesham, the Trent photos, Levelland 1957, the 1976 Iran encounter, the 1989 Linda Cortile abduction, or Phoenix 1997, among others. It is as if no sooner is a claim made than, within the ranks of the devoted, it becomes logically and politically unassailable – it is Grade 1 Listed, subsumed into the general mythology, and as an article of faith may not be contradicted. Thus, with UFOs as with conspiracies, what starts as subversion of conventional thinking – a piece of damned data – becomes, on the other side of the rationalist boundary, a rigid structure in its own right. This transmutation isn't limited to these fields by any means. The concept of leys as 'energy lines' is rigidly locked into a certain corner of thinking about earth mysteries, as is the Otherworldly origin of crop circles.

Among the best evidence for life (of some sort) after death, it has long been held, are the Cross-Correspondences, a series of psychic communications of considerable volume and complexity that were vouchsafed to various mediums over roughly three decades from the early 1900s. In Christopher M Moreman's words: "What seemed at first to be unconnected ramblings were soon discovered to contain complex patterns and hidden messages. Slowly, the workings of an experiment from the other side were pieced together." Moreman wondered (see *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 67, 225-242, 2003) if similar connections – "complex patterns and hidden messages" – might not be perceived among *any* texts of reasonable length. He designed an appropriate experiment, and found that: "In a short period of time, the investigators were able to track over 30 correspondences of varying strengths. Some coincidences were quite startling, leading some of the investigators to wonder if the pseudo-scripts were truly random." And concluded: "It may well be that the cross-correspondences do not represent the strongest evidence of anything more than man's ability to find order in chaos." He noted too: "One must bear in mind that the disparity in size between these pseudo-scripts and the sometimes very lengthy cross-correspondence scripts would only make it more difficult to find randomly occurring correspondences in the smaller scripts."

One is reminded of those who have discovered various 'Bible Codes' that purport to reveal unexpected prophecies in the Torah, only to find that others using the same decrypting techniques on *War and Peace* and *Moby Dick* produced similar startling results. One solemn volume promoting the Bible Code had its system turned upon its own text (see www.nmsr.org/biblecod.htm), which exercise provided this revelation: "The Bible Code is a silly, dumb, fake, false, evil, nasty, dismal fraud and snake-oil hoax." Such Oops! moments ought to be game-changing. They aren't. The reputations of both the Cross-Correspondences and Biblical 'codes' remain immaculate among adherents, and suffer no lack of defenders.

Amid such inflexibility at either end of the anomalists' see-saw, forteans appear to be fanatics of the extreme centre, and certainly score highest on any index of merriment. Zealots of another kind might rejoin that that makes forteans mere trivialisers, possibly even Janus-faced besides. But such traits may imbue forteans and forteana with a particular kind of virtue. How can this be? We shall see. FT

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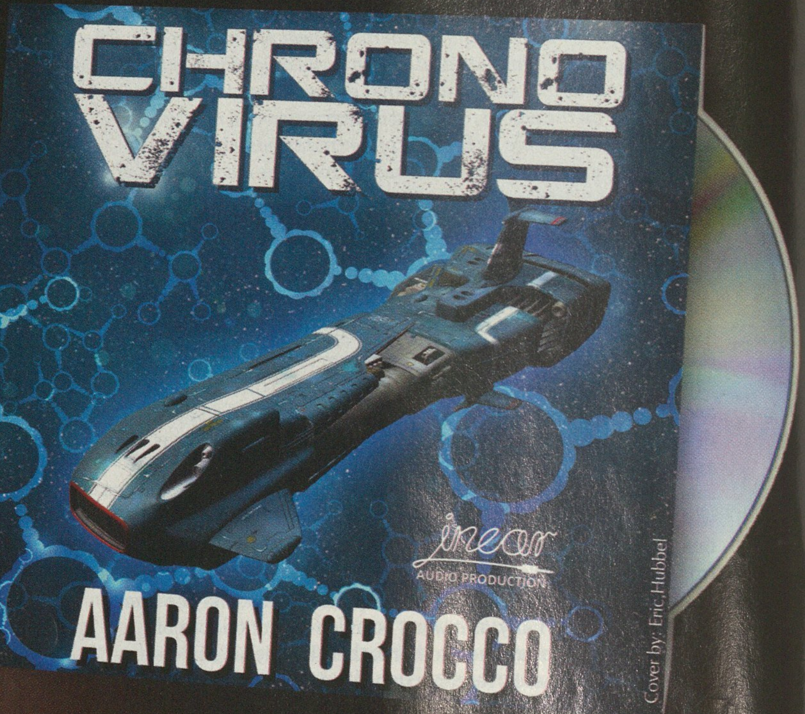

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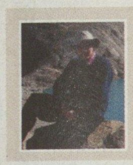
HAVE YOUR SAY

forum

Stoned in Suffolk

DR PETER McCUE goes down to the woods and finds that strange lights and supposed alien craft aren't the only weird things in Rendlesham Forest...



DR PETER McCUE is a former clinical psychologist with a long-standing interest in anomalous phenomena. He has written a book about paranormal and UFO hot spots. He lives in Scotland.

Theo Paijmans discusses a 19th century poltergeist-type case from France (**FT317: 28-29**). It involved the materialisation of stones that would fall on people, usually causing little or no pain, or simply hit the ground. The phenomena are said to have spanned 67 days, between December 1842 and February 1843. Paijmans suggests that this "may well be the longest lasting manifestation of mysteriously materialising and falling stones on record." However, there have been reports from Rendlesham Forest, Suffolk, involving the falling of hot or warm stones.[1] These manifestations have been less dramatic, and less intense, than those reported in the French case, but may have occurred over a much longer period. Indeed, they may be ongoing. I first heard about them in 2007.

In late December 1980, the area was the setting for the so-called Rendlesham Forest Incident (RFI), which involved UFO sightings by United States Air Force personnel (see **FT204:32-39**). However, anomalous phenomena, such as sightings of strange lights, had allegedly occurred in the locality prior to the RFI (see **FT204:40-42**); and witnesses have reported a wide array of anomalous experiences in the forest since then. Brenda Butler, a co-author of the first book about the RFI,[2] has been a frequent visitor to the forest over the years. She informs me that she's witnessed numerous strange phenomena there, including incidents in which hot or warm stones have dropped down beside her. Similarly, Peter Parish, a friend of Butler's, described to me incidents in which very warm stones had landed beside him in the forest. This had happened both during the day and at night, in warm weather. The stones were always smooth. He'd sometimes seen the stones before they hit the ground. They would apparently land without bouncing, although if they were picked up and then dropped, they would bounce as normal. An elongated stone landed on its end in his presence. And, one evening, a stone landed on the roof of his parked car in the forest, without rolling off.

Standing alone at the end of a forest track one night, Parish asked, out loud: "Are you from another dimension?" A stone then fell down beside him. He asked whether a stone could be dropped on the track in front of him, where he was shining his torch beam. That duly happened; and when he asked whether a stone could be dropped on the road behind him, one obligingly fell there! He informed me that on perhaps two or three occasions he'd been among quite densely spaced trees in the eastern part of the forest when a stone had landed near him. However, there was no preceding sound of something falling through the branches. But another of my informants, Don Ramkin, referred to hearing "a clattering through the tree branches" before the landing of stones, although he may have been referring to different incidents. At one point, Parish was on a track when a stone landed on the ground between his legs. He was wearing a rucksack, so it's hard to see how the stone could have come from above.

John Hanson and Dawn Holloway, who have co-authored a series of books on British UFO cases, informed me that they, too, had witnessed incidents involving hot or warm stones in Rendlesham Forest. A teenage girl (now in her 20s) told me of an occasion when she was with her mother and their dog in the forest. A stone rolled along the ground near them. Her mother picked it up, and it was burning hot.

Intriguing as they are, these anomalous stone-falling incidents in Rendlesham Forest may have been relatively infrequent. Several years ago, the Recreation Ranger, Nigel Turner, told me that he wasn't aware of any of the forestry workers having such experiences there. The RFI put Rendlesham Forest on the map, and it has become a magnet for people interested in witnessing unusual phenomena. There's even an official 'UFO Trail' (see **FT204:78-79**). Of course, it's not hard to imagine that people's experiences in the forest, particularly at night, could be influenced by factors such as expectation, suggestion, and imagination. With the possible exception of the teenage girl, the witnesses I've cited had an interest in anomalous phenomena, and had visited the forest repeatedly because of it. However, their experiences with stones can't be convincingly explained away in purely psychological terms. Regarding possible trickery, it's worth noting that none of them had been consistently present each time a stone fell. For example, Peter Parish reports having experienced it on his own, and Brenda Butler told me that it has happened in his absence. In itself, that doesn't entirely rule out trickery, but I rather doubt whether the incidents are attributable to hoaxing, not least because the perpetrator(s) would have had to spend a considerable amount of time carrying out the pranks. Equally, I think it's unlikely that the informants conspired to lie to me about these events.

Without reliable comparative data, it's hard to know whether the Rendlesham area has seen a disproportionate amount of paranormal activity. If a randomly selected locality with a similar size and population were studied, perhaps just as many strange phenomena would come to light. Even if an unusually high number of paranormal incidents have occurred in the forest, it doesn't necessarily mean that there's something intrinsically strange about the locality. It could be more to do with the witnesses – it's conceivable that they've unwittingly generated phenomena themselves, perhaps via a 'group mind' effect. If they changed the venue – for example, if they started visiting a forest elsewhere – it's conceivable that it would take over as a paranormal hotspot. Another possibility is that some sort of independent, external intelligence has been orchestrating phenomena in the forest. If so, there might be no permanent link between it and the locality. At any time of its choosing, it could decide to wrap up its operations in Rendlesham Forest and direct its attentions elsewhere. FT

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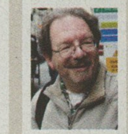
Charles Fort's notes liberated at last!

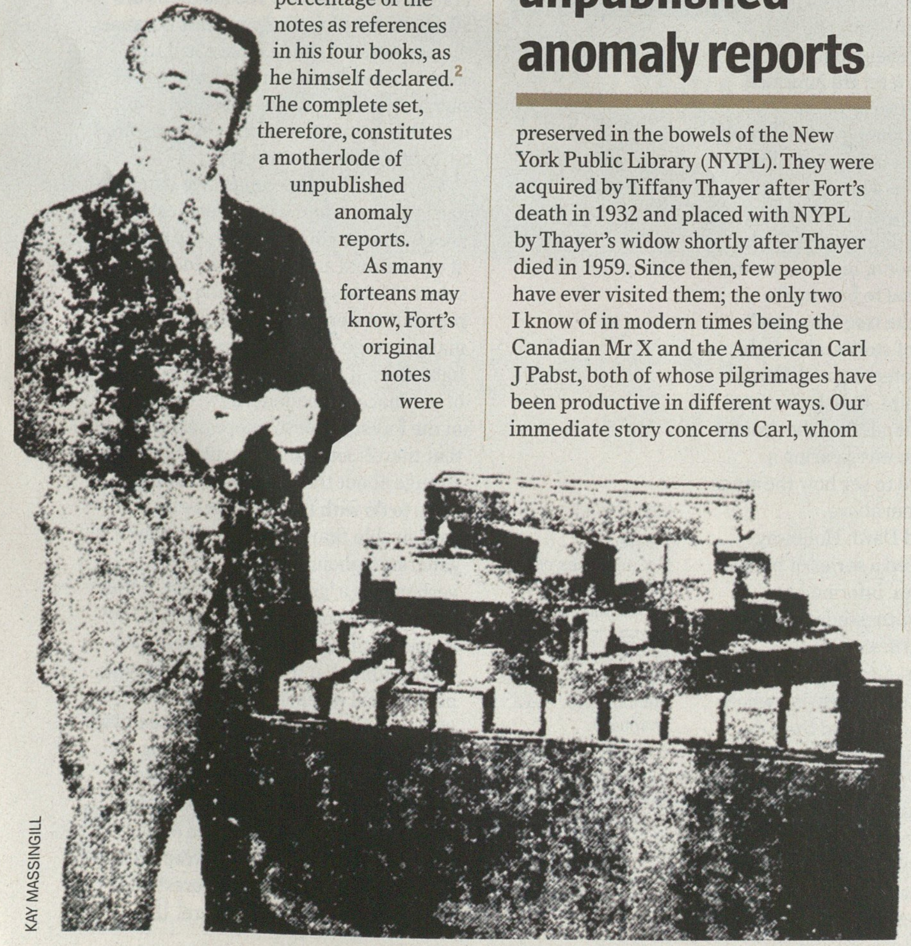
Too often we learn too late of valuable fortean collections being sold or disposed of. For once, says **BOB RICKARD**, here is some good news.



BOB RICKARD founded *Fortean Times* in 1973 and was its co-editor for nearly 30 years. Lately, he's been concerned with both the early years of fortean activity and the future of fortean archiving.

A recent and widely-distributed news release from the World Institute for Scientific Exploration (WISE, founded in 2011) – not to be confused with the Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE, founded in 1982) – announced that its chairman, Dr John H Reed, had rescued "transcriptions of Charles Fort's 60,000 hand-written notes".[1]

I thought readers might be interested to have the background to this remarkable event, which is important not just because it is a tangible relic of Fort's own lengthy endeavours, but because Fort had used only a small percentage of the notes as references in his four books, as he himself declared.[2] The complete set, therefore, constitutes a motherlode of unpublished anomaly reports.



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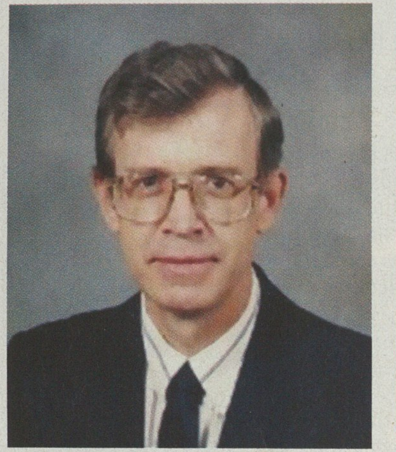


This is a motherlode of unpublished anomaly reports

LEFT: John H Reed.

BELOW: An exceedingly rare image of Charles Fort – from the *Morning Avalanche*, Lubbock, Texas, 5 Feb 1932, the year he died – standing beside a display of some of his notes in their shoeboxes.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CENTRE: An ancient Xerox image of both sides of one of Fort's tiny paper notes. This form allowed Fort to rearrange them by subject or by date when he needed to.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP RIGHT: An example of the card cabinet used by Pabst to house his record cards. His had 54 drawers.

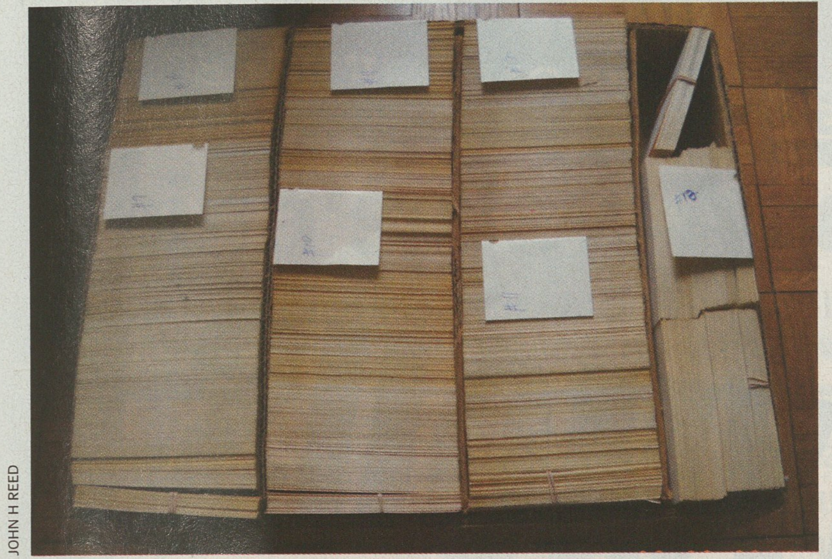
OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP LEFT: During Dr Reed's rescue he had to decant Pabst's record cards from the cabinet into boxes for transporting. In this sample, the markers indicate drawer numbers

As many forteans may know, Fort's original notes were preserved in the bowels of the New York Public Library (NYPL). They were acquired by Tiffany Thayer after Fort's death in 1932 and placed with NYPL by Thayer's widow shortly after Thayer died in 1959. Since then, few people have ever visited them; the only two I know of in modern times being the Canadian Mr X and the American Carl J Pabst, both of whose pilgrimages have been productive in different ways. Our immediate story concerns Carl, whom I elsewhere hail as one of the unsung heroes of forteana because he spent 15 years transcribing *all* of the estimated 60,000 tiny squares of paper on which Fort wrote (often on both sides).[3]

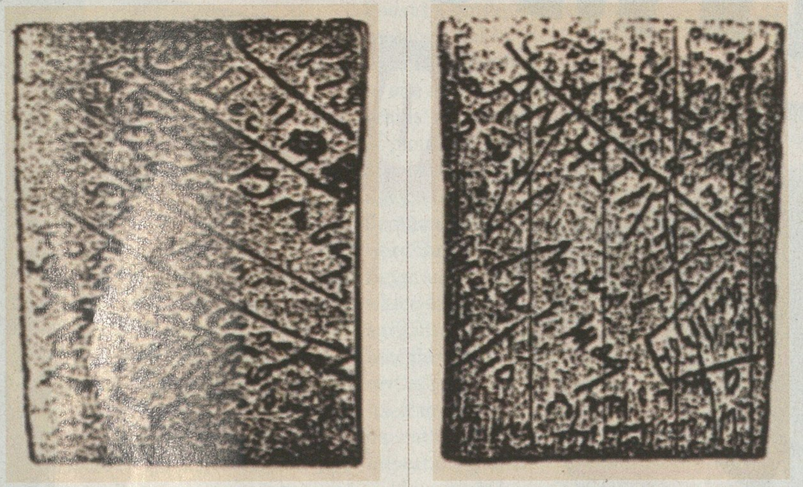
Shortly after Fort died in May 1932, Thayer managed to convince Fort's wife Anna to let him look after the note-filled boxes. Five years later, in September 1937, when Thayer launched *The Fortean Society Magazine* – its title changed to *Doubt* in 1944 – he planned to devote two to three pages each issue to his own transcription of Fort's notes. He kept up with these instalments for the 61 issues he published until his death in 1959, despite them presenting daunting difficulties. In his introduction, Thayer groaned: "They were written in pencil over a period of 26 years, in a code known only to the author [..] The letters, numbers and symbols were wretchedly formed and many of the tiny scraps of paper are misfiled and disarranged." At the end of his 27-year slog – the chronological sequence constantly swapping between Box A and Boxes 1 to 3 and back again, not to mention any dips into the 32 boxes of "memoranda" – Thayer had only reached the early 1860s. Thayer guarded the notes assiduously, rendering them inaccessible, even to forteans, until his widow passed them to the New York Public Library.

Since 1959, Fort's notes were again virtually entombed, this time in the Special Collections Department (SCD) in conservation boxes. Dr Reed explained the reasons: firstly, the special 'restricted hours' imposed by the SCD made access difficult for visitors to the city, who might have to stay over several days; secondly, the SCD forbade the use of any recording method other than paper and pencil; thirdly, the notes have not been conveniently organised, so anyone researching a particular subject would have to spend weeks plodding through the entire collection.

Enter Carl Pabst. He was born in 1941 and had lived in Bridgeport, Connecticut, all his life, dying there in 2004 after contracting Parkinson's and succumbing to pneumonia. Sometime in the early 1970s, he joined Ivan Sanderson's Society for the Investigation of the Unexplained (SITU) and became fascinated by the story of Charles Fort and his myriad of notes. For Pabst, the NYPL was within reach; his home was half an hour's walk from Fairfield station, where he could catch a train into Grand Central Station, just over an hour away, and then walk the three blocks to the Library.



JOHN H REED



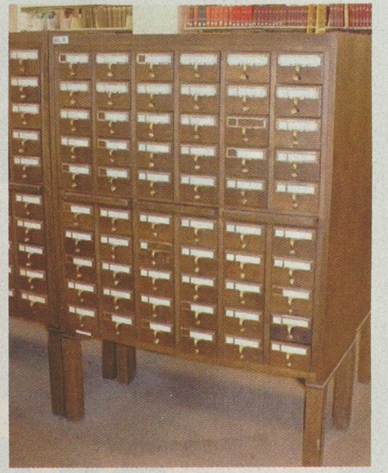
KAY MASSINGILL

Beginning sometime in 1972, Carl made daily trips into New York for the next 15 years, copying each note – "now discoloured and crumbling" – carefully preserving Fort's own system of symbols and abbreviations. Back home, he'd type each handwritten note onto its own 3x5in index card and file it in the 54-drawer card cabinet that he had purchased for this purpose.

The first glimpse we have of this project is in the January 1973 issue of SITU's journal *Pursuit*,[4] in which Pabst presents a short note on the difficulties of transcribing Fort's scribbles. He adds: "It isn't possible to just sit down and read [them], they require translation. I expect to spend two years on this project." The task was more difficult than Carl had anticipated; as Dr Reed observed from letters found in Pabst's correspondence, the transcription was not complete until 1987. In a letter to a colleague Carl stated that he was "the only person in the world who had a complete set of Charles Fort's notes outside the New York Public Library".[5]

Pabst did not go public until 1979, when the first chunk of his transcriptions was published in *Pursuit*. Dr Reed notes: "Carl began at the year 1800, Fort's preferred starting date; when Carl's last instalment appeared in 1988, a decade later, he had only reached the year 1860."[6]

Concurrently, Carl also re-typed each record onto a page of paper, which, on completion, formed a pile four feet (1.2m) high. His hope was to sell this to a publisher, mainly to fund his medical treatment, but much to his disappointment he was not offered what he considered enough. After Carl died in late 2004, the house passed to a relative who also lived there, and the card cabinet with its precious contents remained in Carl's upstairs study.



JOHN H REED

Dr Reed had known of Carl's endeavour, as he too had been a member of SITU in those early days. However, Reed says he didn't realise that Carl had transcribed *all* of the notes until "around 2010, when I was visiting Carl's relative and saw the card catalogue, and looked in several random drawers all filled with thousands of 3x5s". Subsequently, on several occasions, Reed tried to purchase Carl's archive, "but the relative, for whatever reason, would not sell". Fearing that it risked being lost or destroyed, Dr Reed requested – "in late 2013, and repeated in early 2014" – Carl's relatives and their legal representatives to inform him if they planned to sell the house or Carl's collection, "especially the card catalogue".

In July 2014, Dr Reed had been attending conferences around the US and Europe, and then discovered that the house had been sold four months earlier. Fearing the worst, he tracked down the new owners, who had no idea of the importance or significance of Carl's legacy. To his immense relief, Reed learned that although they intended to dispose of the cards and keep the cabinet, they had not yet done so. Reed promptly rushed to Bridgeport and, on 29 July – "at the 11th hour" – purchased the complete archive and 65 notebooks packed with clippings and correspondence.

Dr Reed – who had, in 2007, managed to rescue the huge SITU archive "from a warehouse where it had been stored for almost 20 years" – says that WISE plans to digitise Fort's notes and make them available online, alongside the entire set of 89 issues of *Pursuit* which are already available on the WISE wiki.[7] We forteans owe him our sincere thanks. FT

NOTES

1 *WISE Journal*, vol 3, no 2 (Oct 2014): http:/wisewiki.org/dl93.

2 Damon Knight, *Charles Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained*, (1970) p216.

3 – The figure of '60,000' traditionally put to Fort's notes is difficult to verify at this remove. In 1919, shortly after the publication of *Book of the Damned*, the *Chicago Daily News* published a letter from Fort in which he owns up to destroying his first collection of 25,000 notes. Beginning over again, he gathered "40,000 notes arranged under 1,300 headings". We know he went on to collect many more. How many notes were used in his four books? I've not counted, but Damon Knight writes that he went through them all making file cards and ended up with 1,200. I'm sure more research can be done on this subject.

4 Carl Pabst, 'Translating Charles Fort's Notes', *Pursuit*, vol 6, no 2 (1973), p46.

5 - Carl Pabst, private letters acquired by John H Reed on 29 July 2014.

6 Carl's transcriptions appeared in *Pursuit* from vol 12 no 1 (1979) until its last issue, vol 21 no 1 (1988).

7 www.wisewiki.org .

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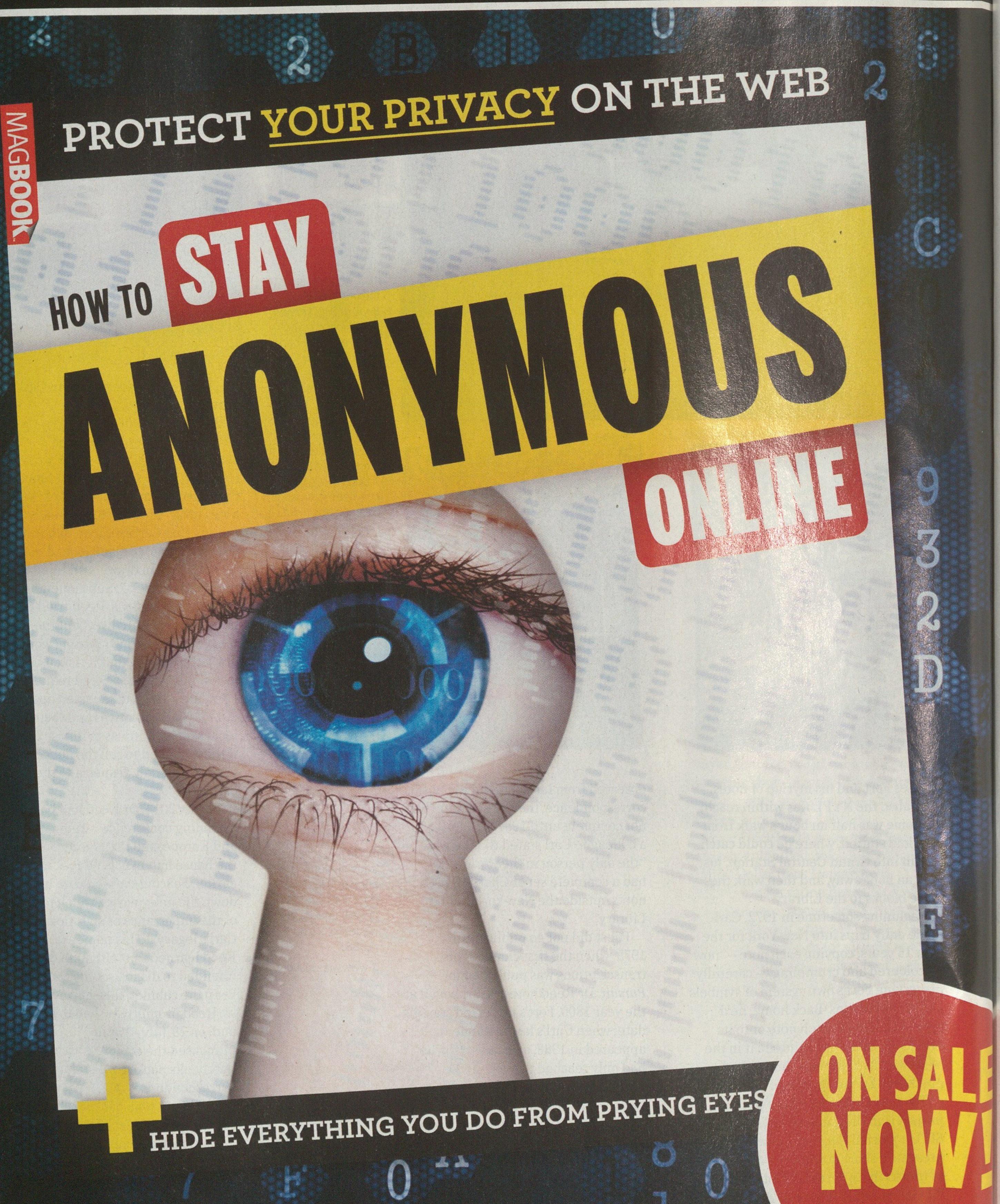
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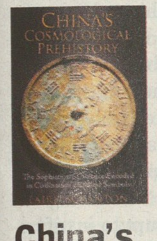
This month's books, films and games

reviews

China's New Age makeover

Beneath the sacred knowledge of the ancients lies the legacy of an earlier (and unidentified) Golden Age culture whose legacy was China's civilisation



China's Cosmological Prehistory

Laird Scranton

Inner Traditions 2014

Pb, 183pp, illus, bib, ind, $16.95, ISBN 9781620553299

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £18.00

On the face of it, Scranton spins some interesting hypotheses, relating cosmogony to more down-to-earth cultural usages such as land ownership, language, ground plans, mulberry trees, mandalas, amulets and even magic squares – and his chapters on these employ symbolism, numerology, ancient units of measurement, and prehistoric linguistics.

His earlier studies of the sacred symbols and creation myths of the Dogon of West Africa and their counterparts in Egypt, India and Tibet have brought him to consider, in this book, the traditions of early and prehistoric China. For the Chinese – or rather the accretion of tribes, clans, states and cultures that coalesce as 'China' – he goes back to the ancient symbols of animals and glyphs said to date from the time of Fu Xi and Nu Wa, the primogeniture gods and culture heroes of the Chinese, sometimes depicted as half-human, half-snake. In particular, he relies on dongba, "the last known surviving hieroglyphic language" used by the Bon priests of the Nakhi people of southwest China.

For example, Scranton draws a close parallel between the Chinese 'well-field' system of traditional rural agriculture and the Dogon, who divide the land into grids of eight, while a ninth houses a smithy. For reasons underpinned by their mythology, each Dogon field is assigned to one of the traditional 'eight grains' and the preferred method of ploughing was to criss-cross, also in a grid pattern magically associated with 'weaving'. Scranton, then, explores the root words and symbols in the Dogon, Egyptian and Chinese languages which are derived from common agricultural practices and shows how they relate to their respective myths. It is as though cosmogony itself forms a type of mnemonic for both everyday practices and important rituals.

Since prehistory, Chinese agriculture has employed the 'well-field' system. Imagine a 3x3 square, the central square housing a well and the eight surrounding squares forming individual plots for crops. Scranton notes that the nine-square grid forms the basis not just of the written characters for (animal) pound, field and well, but also the magic-number talismans still widely used today, and even the ground-plans of temples, palaces and cities. And further, he declares, wherever we find "an imperative to align ritual structures to the cardinal points" we'll find an ancient cosmology that defines it. In this case the well-field system, along with methods of flood control and the recurring importance of the number nine, is credited to Da Yu (Yu the Great), a legendary emperor believed to have lived before 2100 BC.

In another chapter, Scranton deconstructs the legend of the Fusang tree, a giant tree that grows from the earth to the heavens, having a huge whirlpool at its base. From its branches 10 suns roost overnight, until a great hero kills nine of them. In China, the mulberry tree is regarded as a "spirit tree", closely associated with the Fusang, and the juice of its fruits allowed the gods to live in the air. Scranton has fun with various Chinese, Egyptian, Sanskrit and Dogon words which seem to associate with each other, mythologically and symbolically to reveal layers of meaning.

> "Scranton alludes frequently to the primal 'earlier culture' but never identifies it"

So he continues, forging correspondences between the earth (square), the heavens (circle), the primal 'waters'/ Creation (spiral) ... adding Buddhist stupas and nomad yurts, the Yijing, and systems that use zodiacal animals. A curious omission here – which would not have been out of place – is any reference to Isaac Newton Vail, an American Quaker (d. 1912),who developed a phenomenology placing the biblical "waters of the firmament" in the upper atmosphere, where it appears as a reflective layer of ice crystals. The late Donald Cyr (editor of *Stonehenge Viewpoint*) called the tree-like reflection of great rivers in the sky Fusang, and argued that various optical phenomena – such as sun-dogs (parhelia) and pillars of light – gave rise to symbols found on megaliths through Europe.

Underlying his various expositions is Scranton's belief that "the sacred knowledge of the ancients is the legacy of an earlier culture [which] gave primitive humanity the tools they needed to found the first civilisations". I understand the profound fascination with a Golden Age; a psychical nostalgia powers many forms of artistic and ritual expression. We are not free of it today as, for example, our science fiction and fantasy can show the ancient past as populated by numinous types, from aliens and elves to spirits and heroes. In this cosmogony, god-like tutelary entities lived among mankind bringing harmony to every aspect of life as they sought to lift each chosen race out of their ignorance.

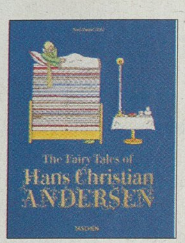
Some New Age writers and historians of magical traditions have described this interpretation of history in terms of a decline – a reversal of 'progress'; that after the Golden Age there was a 'Fall', since when we have not yet matched the 'first culture' in science or spirituality; and that magic is sometimes an attempt to recover that earlier state. Whether those hero-teachers came from space, the future or superior spiritual realms, we have to ask: where did they get their advanced knowledge or technology from?

While Scranton alludes, frequently, to the primal "earlier culture" that bequeathed such bright gifts, he never defines or identifies it; nor is it clear whether he means that each of his exemplar cultures had their own 'first teachers', or whether they all benefited

Continued on p58

Pleasingly sad

A Victorian æsthetic, without redemption, replaces folkloric authenticity



The Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen

Ed Noel Daniel

Taschen 2013
Hb, 320pp, illus, £24.99, ISBN 978-3836526753
FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.49

'He will be a great writer', said the good fairy. 'In fact he will be the only Danish author known to anyone outside his own country. Millions will read his works. They will be loved for generations'. She waved her wand and smirked. What could go wrong now? 'Yes, said the cruel one, 'and he'll write children's fairy stories'. Hans Christian Andersen knew destiny when it spoke. He laid aside an unfinished novel and got on with 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier'.

The young man from Odense was driven by ambition. Hatched in ugliness, he knew that only literary genius could carry him into high society, that bright river where 'the great swans swam all around him and stroked him with their bills'. The stories began coming in 1835 and carried on until 1872. Sometimes the lead character is a bemused child, sometimes a resourceful young man making his way in the world: both are Andersen. It is surprising how many of these stories – 'The Tinderbox', 'The Flying Trunk', 'The Emperor's New Clothes' – begin with adventurers who arrive in the city. Write about what you know! Instead of the forests and cottages of the folktale world, we have noisy gutters and streets, views over the chimneytops, parlours stuffed with middle-class bric-a-brac, and consumer goods: bells that sing, ornaments that nod, and mechanical nightingales.

For all the dreamy background of palaces, talking toys and dancing flowers, Andersen is as Victorian as Dickens. He loves innocent sweethearts and the æstheticisation of death; he is at home in the tradition of pleasing sadness, which nowadays only children understand. He has a fine note of sarcasm, and can give withering moral judgements. The princess is told "You were all too ready to kiss a swineherd for a tinkling toy. You are properly punished" – and there is no redemption.

He has a fascination with fire, candlelight and brightness, which reaches its purest expression in 'The Little Match Girl'. Like many children, he knows the trembling awareness that lovely things may break or burn. That is a particularly middle-class sensibility – it would take a sledgehammer to break most things in the peasant home – but then Andersen, who was raised amidst story-telling poverty, was indifferent to the canon of ethnic folktales. Authenticity is for the doctors and the nationalists. The real folk take an imagination honed by fairytales in the long winter darkness, and then let it fly.

And now Taschen have prepared this gilded nightingale-cage of a book, decorated elaborately with the work of 22 illustrators from all countries and periods, plus introduction, biographies and other apparatus. It's not clear whether it's for adults or children, but then that's true of the author as well. If it sends either back to the actual, unadorned Andersen, it will have done its task.

Jeremy Harte

Fortean Times Verdict
THE INNER MIND OF A UNIQUE MYTHOLOGIST REVEALED **9**

Continued from p57

from a single glorious starting point, as many cosmologies maintain (deferring to gods or aliens). Does the similarity of the symbols and phonetics of different cultures automatically mean they have a common origin? Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar! And when Scranton describes this ancient transmission as revealing "sophisticated scientific understanding of matter and energy", he is over-reaching.

In a way, he doesn't need such problematic hypothetical leaps. With Fort's comment about the power of steam, present since man began boiling water or observed geysers, but not applied until "steam engine time" in mind, perhaps all it needs, long ago, is an intelligent, perceptive and able person who, in a moment of inspiration, sees a way to start fire or make a wheel. In explaining or teaching the concept they could only use the language and ideas of the time… a language that might well have been primitive, but also rich in symbolism and meaning. The mythological refinements would accrue over the millennia. I hope Scranton will explore and explain this further.

Bob Rickard

Fortean Times Verdict
INTEESTING BUT (SO FAR) INCONCLUSIVE **7**

Clockwork Rhetoric

The Language and Style of Steampunk

Ed: Barry Brummett

University Press of Mississippi 2014
Hb, 210pp, notes, ind, $60.00, ISBN 9781628460919
FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £58.80

You know a subcultural style has gone mainstream when professors from mid-western universities start publishing expensive cultural studies volumes on it, and so it is with steampunk. Over the last few years, steampunk has gone from a minor genre of sci-fi with its roots in Jules Verne and H G Wells and more recent inspiration from Michael Moorcock, KW Jeter and William Gibson to a visual æsthetic that has become a cinematic cliché. It has even been co-opted by Justin Bieber for a music video. As a visual style it posits an æsthetic of the late 19th century extrapolated to encompass alternative versions of modern tech and a dress sense that fuses high Victorian garb with clockwork cyborg accessorising, top hats, corsets, cogs and ray guns. In *Clockwork Rhetoric,* Prof Brummett and his contributors attempt to interrogate Steampunk to explore the æsthetics for hidden meanings in terms of race, class and gender, as well as their relation to the machine, the exotic and its articulation in the media.

There are a number of problems. Firstly, most of the steampunks are utterly oblivious to these hidden meanings; they just like dressing up. The result is a palpable sense of straining as the authors attempt to justify their readings of implicit subtexts in the genre's articulation, which are utterly missing in the intentions of most of their subjects, who would be likely to greet the suggestion that they are critiquing or colluding with colonialism, for example, with incredulity. Secondly, they have a very partial grasp of Steampunk itself. Their experience of the æsthetic is almost entirely American, with the only international aspects considered being those easily available in the US, Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* films, *Doctor Who* and Japanese anime. It completely ignores the British variant, which is more closely aligned with goth than the US version (indeed UK steampunk has been unkindly derided as 'an excuse for goths to wear brown'), and overlaps with the 'Chap' æsthetic of moustache fetishism, tea and cricket. They would, I am sure, have been very exercised by the UK steampunk 'sport' of Tea Duelling, for example, had they been aware of it.

Even from a US perspective Prof Brummett and colleagues totally miss one of the very significant root strands of steampunk: Maker culture and the overlapping Burners. I first encountered steampunk in the flesh at US Maker Faires around 2009, where it seemed primarily to be about building serious retro-tech and just dressing up to show it off. This encompassed beautiful walnut and brass computer casemods, typewriter-styled wooden laptops and a postal service involving messengers with cleft sticks. High profile steampunks like Obtanium Works do not get a look-in. You would have thought one of the authors would have noticed their full-size Victorian house-come-Zeppelin-gondola on wheels, containing a camera obscura, The Neverwas Haul. When I saw it, it arrived pulled by a traction engine the creators had rebuilt, accompanied by elegant women on stilts. This and other pieces of serious steampunk tech have been a major presence at Burning Man in recent years, but none of this gets a look-in here, and indeed neither does the more edgy and transgressive take on it embodied by the likes of the Boiler Bar Burlesque show. As far as we get is an analysis of cog cufflinks on Etsy. This suggests a poor grasp of the steampunk æsthetic, and indeed the essays struggle to make incisive points about the culture at all. The usual cult studies faves of Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard get wheeled out, but to little practical effect, and the nadir is reached with an essay on steampunk in *Doctor Who* that spends a large proportion of its time recounting the plot of three episodes and manages a level of analysis less incisive than most fan sites.

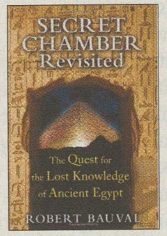
I have an equivocal attitude to cultural studies: when it's good, it can provide a riveting analysis of contemporary culture; but an awful lot of it is banal observations of partially understood cultures dressed up in academic language. It can embody all the compromised unthinkingly superior attitudes of colonial anthropology, but as it is looking at street style or TV programmes, no one calls the researchers on it. Look as I might, for all their talk of historical points of divergence and rhetorical function, none of the authors here appears to have spoken to a steampunk.

Ian Simmons

Fortean Times Verdict
ACADEMIC GLOSS ON PEOPLE WHO JUST LIKE DRESSING UP **6**

It's kiss-and-tell time

A 500-page exercise in self-justification (with some admittedly amusing goss) does not advance ancient Egyptian scholarship



Secret Chamber Revisited

The Quest for the Lost Knowledge of Ancient Egypt

Robert Bauval

Bear and Co 2014
Pb, 528pp, illus, bib, ind, £16.99, ISBN 9781591431923
FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £15.29

This book originally appeared back in 1999 with a different subtitle (*The Quest for the Hall of Records*), but Bauval has substantially rewritten and updated it for this new edition. Its principal characters are the same: Zahi Hawass, Egyptology's erstwhile Indiana Jones; Edgar Cayce and the organisations founded by his followers; Rudolf Gantenbrink, the German engineer who designed a robot to explore the small shafts in the Great Pyramid; and of course, the coterie of alternative researchers who have focused on the Giza complex, including Bauval himself.

It belongs to a rather niche area of gonzo scholarship which is perhaps best characterised as kiss-and-tell archæology. While the title promises a book about the secrets of these most enigmatic monuments, it turns out to be about the people who have gone looking for those secrets, and who are, in fact, largely responsible for the idea that such secrets are there to be found. Bauval clearly has an axe to grind; he feels that Hawass and the ARE (the Association for Research and Enlightenment) have been Up To Something, and it is his duty to tell the world about their skulduggery – at times in excruciating detail.

While the book does include a whistle-stop tour of early explorations of the Giza complex, it focuses on events in the later 20th and early 21st centuries; in particular, the attempt by the ARE to prove Cayce's prophecies about an Atlantean hall of records existing under the Sphinx, and the extent to which Hawass collaborated (from the tone of the book, one might perhaps use the term 'conspired') with an apparently shadowy group of Caycean devotees to allow them access to the monuments, while excluding other genuine researchers (such as Robert Bauval) and generally making life mysterious and difficult for everybody.

Why is this important? Well, in the bigger picture of archæology, it isn't. While it's scurrilously entertaining to hear how Hawass used to run things in Egypt, before the government got shot of him after the 'revolution', it doesn't advance our knowledge of ancient Egypt or the true purpose of the pyramids and the broader Giza complex. And while one can sympathise with Bauval to some extent (after all, if one group of speculative researchers can be allowed in, why not another?) it's hard to see how, some years after most of the events, it is worth the effort of such a huge book on the subject.

In fact, some (clearly jaundiced) readers might see the whole thing as an outsize exercise in self-justification by a man who sees himself as central to contemporary Egyptology. It is certainly curious how many of the narratives involve Bauval as a player. It is also tediously clear from the copious documentation that Bauval wants to position himself on the side of the goodies, and show how he has been wronged by practically every other actor in the rather intimate drama played out in over 500 pages of what one might be forgiven for seeing as gossip.

This book is not unique; there is a small body of literature already in the canon of kiss-and-tell Egyptology, and likely more on the way. While these books ostensibly give lay readers a feeling they are in the know about what happens behind the scenes in modern archæology, they are ultimately written for a smaller audience of friends and colleagues – and enemies – who actually have an opinion about who should have said or done what and to whom.

Robert Bauval writes plenty of consistently interesting and well-argued books and articles on ancient history, and some of his theories about the significance of pyramids in ancient Egypt are every bit as plausible as anything that orthodox Egyptology has come up with. But this book is unlikely to win him any new adherents to his theories; if anything, it just might put off readers from his more worthwhile material.

Noel Rooney

Fortean Times Verdict
SETTLING SCORES MAKES FOR UNCONVINCING SCHOLARSHIP **5**

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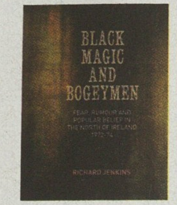
No go the bogeyman

When you add rumours of black magic (and possibly black ops) to a violently divided society, an occult panic ensues…



Black Magic and Bogeymen

Fear, Rumour and Popular Belief in the North of Ireland 1972–74

Richard Jenkins

Cork University Press 2014
Hb, 304pp, notes, bib, ind, £35.00, ISBN 9781782050964
FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £31.50

In this thoroughly researched book, Professor Richard Jenkins, who was brought up in Northern Ireland, examines a 'black magic' scare that took place there in the early 1970s. Whilst it has affinities with similar 'occult panics' that occurred on the mainland around the same time (ably recounted by Bill Ellis in his article for 'The Highgate Cemetery Vampire Hunt', in *Folklore* vol. 104, 1993, pp13–39), the NI panic took on certain unique characteristics, on account of the 'Troubles', which were reaching a peak at this time.

Jenkins pinpoints the beginning of the scare with the murder of 10-year-old Brian McDermott in September 1973; to some, the boy's mutilated body indicated a 'ritualistic' element to the killing.

This horrific crime was linked in the local press to the discovery, one month earlier, of supposed 'black magic' ceremonies on the Copeland Islands, north of County Down. The evidence was vague (symbols drawn in sand, sheep's carcases), but it was enough to start the panic. Rumours and stories in the press began to appear; sacrificed animals, houses with weird symbols on the walls, covens, and Satanists seeking to kidnap and sacrifice children. In this pre-Pagan Federation period, witchcraft and Satanism were conflated without a murmur.

Loyalist newspapers began to hint at witchcraft and devil worship within the Catholic community: the Shankill Road-based *WDA News* suggesting that Catholic teens had tried to contact the spirits of dead IRA men.

Jenkins observes that the black magic scare wasn't the only way in which a belief in the supernatural became assimilated with the 'Troubles'.

He examines local lore such as the 'Crying Stairs' at Divis Flats, West Belfast, where residents told of ghostly cries and moans being heard at the site of a booby trap explosion in which three British soldiers had been killed. Jenkins links these cries with *banshee* lore, and other contemporary iterations of the legend, apparently confined to the Catholic community. The large numbers of violent deaths during this period were seen as the reason banshees had reappeared; in one case, it was said that a team of Provisional IRA men had "seen off" a banshee that was bothering the local community. Another such legend was the "ghost patrol" at Narrow Water, South Down, where a British military convoy had been blown up by the IRA. After the event, locals spoke of being flagged down by phantom soldiers. Were these genuine ghosts? Or had it been a British psy-ops operation, with soldiers setting up roadblocks along the road, and masquerading as ghosts popping up from behind the hedges?

It was rumoured in the Ardoyne that stories of a 'black man' – perhaps the Devil himself – who roamed the district at night had been disseminated by the British, as a means to keep young people off the streets after dark. The rise and fall of the 'black man' rumours coincided with the arrival and departure of the Parachute Regiment in the Ardoyne.

An added ingredient in the development of the scare was the involvement of British Army intelligence operatives, who used these rumours, pre-existing ghost lore and local legend for psy-ops purposes, creating black magic sites in deserted houses, to give the impression that rituals had been conducted there. This amplified the panic, which was widely reported in the media – both the mainstream Northern Ireland press, and in Loyalist and Republican papers.

Colin Wallace, former British Army 'Information Policy Unit' intelligence operative and subsequent 'whistleblower', agreed to be interviewed by Jenkins for this book. He recalls doing his homework diligently, researching ceremonial magicians' rituals and paraphernalia. Thus, wooden knives with Hebrew letters inscribed on the handles were left at certain sites, together with candles and chalk circles decorated with 'magic' symbols.

When asked what had been the intention behind all this, Wallace admitted, oddly: "I don't think there was any clearly defined policy." It seems that the Army's aim was simply to fuel the panic in what was already a highly charged atmosphere. In doing so, British intelligence operations encouraged further 'ostension,' when thrill-seeking young people began to experiment with occultism, and to create their own ritual sites. Local newspapers fed this trend, claiming that youngsters were seeking a form of escapism from the 'Troubles' by "dabbling in the occult", no doubt inspired by the Dennis Wheatley novels and Hammer horror films that were as popular in Northern Ireland during this period as they were on the mainland.

Chris Josiffe

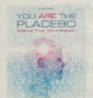
Fortean Times Verdict
THE NORN IRON TROUBLES, BLACK MAGIC AND A LITTLE LOCAL PANIC 8

You are the Placebo

Making your Mind Matter

Joe Dispenza

Hay House 2014
Pb, 345pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781781802571
FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £11.69



Dispanza, a neurologist, provides a history of the 'placebo' effect – how an innocuous medicine can produce positive results if the patient believes in its efficacy – and the trials have generally confirmed the effect's reality. But this study offers more, being an account of how Dispenza recovered from spinal injuries and, the main thrust as far as the publisher is concerned, a motivational thesis suggesting that a range of modern afflictions (including addictions, obesity, low self-esteem, etc) could respond to a sound method of tricking ourselves.

Otto Minyak

Fortean Times Verdict
THINK YOURSELF BETTER WITH A PLACEBO 9

History that Time Forgot

100 Front Pages and the Stories Behind Them

Haynes 2014
Hb, 207pp, illus, £20.00, ISBN 9780857337276
FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £20.00

An unprepossessing cover hides goodies from a century of the *Mirror*, including Colonel Barker, a cross-dressing fascist whom Radclyffe Hall described elsewhere as "a pervert of the most undesirable type". The *Mirror's* coverage does not convey quite how unusual she was – she organised practice brawls for fellow female fascists.

A flavour of the rest: "Man who never went out for 25 years had hair 5ft 8in long" and "Madness village is praying: lift the curse of our father's sins". Forteana shares pages with now-dead but strangely familiar pols and celebs. Fun.

Val Stevenson

Fortean Times Verdict
ALL OUR YESTERDAYS, AND VERY ODD THEY WERE TOO… 9

ALSO RECEIVED

We leaf through a selection of recent fortean books...

The Self-Actualizing Cosmos

Ervin Laszlo

Inner Traditions 2014
Pb, 199pp, refs, ind, $14.95, ISBN 9781620552766

Laszlo – a Nobel-nominated author, praised by the likes of Stanislav Grof – tackles the mysteries of paradoxical and anomalous phenomena with a mash-up of astrophysics, quantum physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, parapsychology, thanatology and consciousness. Far from the Universe (or our existence, whichever is more inclusive) being "mindless, purposeless and directionless", he argues that it is on a journey to self-realisation. He defines his 'Akasha Hypothesis' (conceived by Hindu philosophers long before Lobsang Rampa) as a plane of "nonlocal interconnectedness", which sounds very fortean. Brings bang up-to-date the classic hippy phenomenology of Fritjof Capra *et al.*

The House Where Evil Lurks

Brandon Callahan

Llewellyn 2014
Pb, 250pp, $15.99, ISBN 9780738740669

"After coming face to face with evil, one man's soul is scarred forever," froths the blurb. That man is the author, who tries to convince you that this "is a true account of one of the most deadly hauntings ever recorded". Callahan claims to have battled the cannibalistic murderer who ran a funeral home in a town he doesn't name "outside Jefferson City", Missouri, and doesn't say when, or even reference the newsclippings he cites. His characters begin their sentences with "Dude" and end them with "I shit you not!", while an EVP voice from a recorder, not to be outdone, growls "You're fucked!" Trees died for this rubbish?

Paranormal Unwrapped

Shannon Sylvia & Katie Boyd

Schiffer Books 2012
Pb, 128pp, £10.50 / $16.99, ISBN 9780764341250

The authors (a "famous ghost hunter" and an "international demonologist" who survived childhoods in homes tormented with ghosts, poltergeists and other paranormal phenomena before branching out into investigating cryptids, UFOs, crop circles and hauntings) do not come across as swivel-eyed loons. Their advice to would-be investigators is practical, especially about mental and physical preparation for investigations (eg. don't use drugs, pay attention to feelings of discomfort, don't go alone, don't lie or ramp up the drama, etc) and the pitfalls of being in the media spotlight. There much here also about good equipment, good methods – even, should you choose to start a group, on choosing and registering a name. There is a sample investigation questionnaire and even a chart of types of 'orbs' caused by flash-reflection off dust and bugs.

How to Bag a Jabberwocky

Major Jack Union

Book Guild Publishing 2012
Hb, 138pp, illus, £12.99, ISBN 9781846247538

Another fictional 'guide book' in the style of the recent *How to Goblin-proof your Chicken Coop*, has much fun with classic fortean and cryptozoological material. It presents the monster-hunting adventures of a retired Victorian secret agent whose mother was a high-class brothel madam and whose father (the "Unknown hero of Kabul") defended Queen and country against frightful beasts and even Martians. After each chapter describing the form and habits of 15 monsters – from Air-Krackens and Bandersnatches to Vampires and Yetis – is a personal account of the Major's engagement with them. Pure whimsy, which might amuse some.

The 100 Best British Ghost Stories

Gillian Bennett

Amberley Publishing 2012
Pb, pp192, refs, illus, £14.99. ISBN: 9781445606941

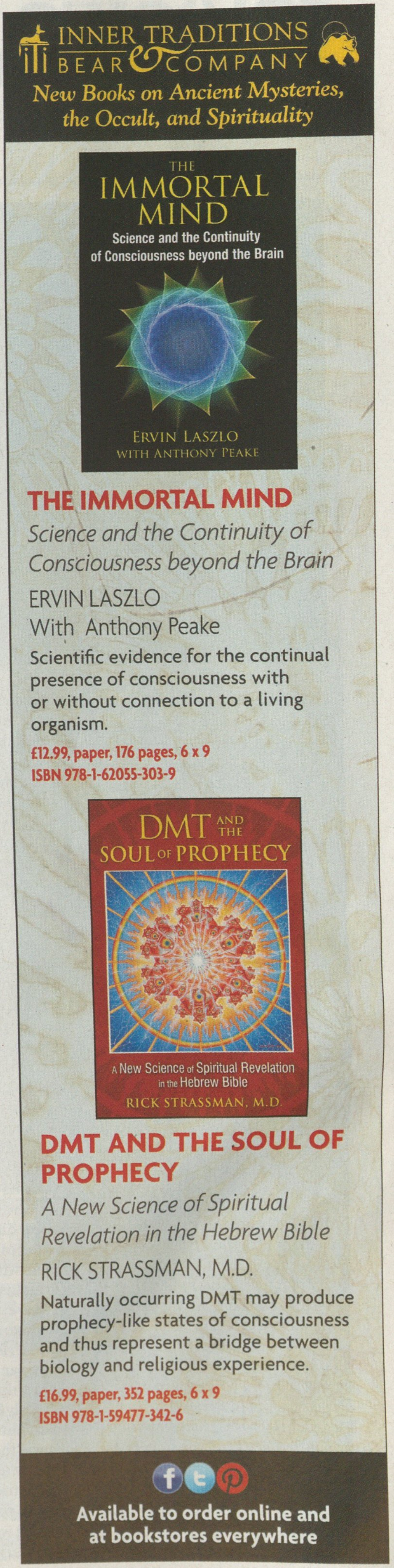
Folklorist Gillian Bennett's book *Urban Legends* is one of the field's classics. This selection of tales of "ghosts, poltergeists, boggarts and black dogs" spanning four centuries is drawn from her own collection of British oral traditions and deserves equal recognition. She presents them in chronological order so that we may observe "the way ghost-lore changes over time". It's another gem from that star of local history publishing, Amberley.

Ghosts, Spirits and Hauntings

Eds Michael Pye & Kirsten DAlley

New Page Books 2011
Pb, 220pp, illus, notes, ind, £13.99, ISBN 9781601631749

Essentially an anthology of 10 original essays on theries abut hauntings, their type and relation to folklore and parapsychology, with contributions from Loyd Auerbach, Nick Refern, Andrew Nichols, Bob Curran and Raymond Buckland, among others.



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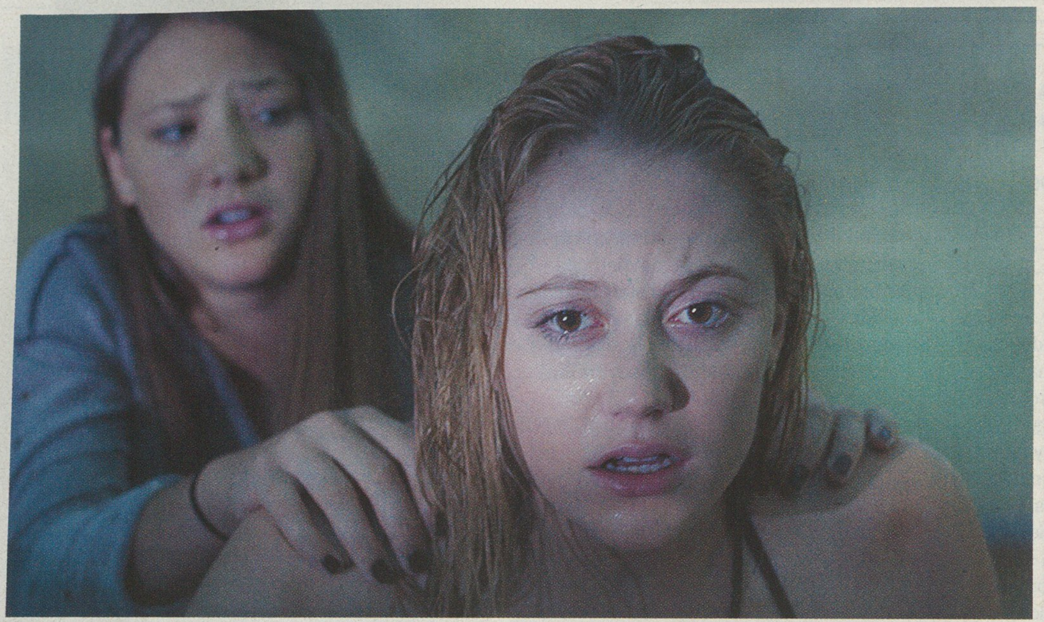


It Follows

Dir David Robert Mitchell, US 2014

On UK release from 27 February

An interesting fact about the horror genre is that its target audience is females aged 16 to 24; hit that demographic and you've struck gold. *It Follows* could be no better targeted at that -audience if it had laser sights attached.

Jay (Maika Monroe) has a seemingly innocent sexual encounter with Hugh (Jake Weary) only to be drugged by her new lover. Waking up, she finds herself tied to a wheelchair while Hugh explains why he has taken this unexpected action. "It" has been following him; and now he has had sex with Jay, it will follow her. It doesn't run; it walks. It will look like someone she knows or someone she loves, but only she will be able to see it. If it touches her, she's dead. Released from her capture, Jay begins to see visions of something slowly stalking her, and with the help of her close friends decides to destroy the "it" that now follows her.

This simple premise is executed effectively, creating an above average horror film that, while not perfect, resonates and stays with you after you've left the cinema. Director David Robert Mitchell has clearly been influenced by other films but manages to put his own spin on things you've seen before, creating something fresher, darker and more unnerving. There's shades of *The Virgin Suicides* here – languid dialogue, dreamy internal monologues and a cast made up of young actors – especially given the film's backdrop of high schools and teen hangouts. The early work of John Carpenter could also be cited as an influence, with the slow, stalker-ish movements of the antagonist, accompanied by an electronic soundtrack (the outfit behind which, Disasterpiece, should be applauded for a highly originally film score).

Most credit, though, goes to Mitchell who has penned and directed a story that creates an intense nightmare from something seemingly very ordinary – and a film that becomes increasingly terrifying to watch. There's no monster, no dripping blood, no masked murderer; there is only a person, someone you know, slowly, methodically, walking toward you, coming to take your life by simply touching you. It's that simple, and it is devastatingly effective. Other horror directors should take note of how Mitchell creates an atmosphere without using visuals to fool an audience.

The cast is good, too, with Maiki Monroe, the lead, showing us why she's a rising star. Her mixture of allure and vulnerability is judged perfectly, allowing the viewer to actually care about the film's young heroine – no mean feat in a horror movie these days. Mitchell's direction frequently breathes new life into a tried, tested and often tired genre; witness the 360-degree pans during which we, the audience, can see, way off in the distance, someone slowly walking toward the heroine. Plotwise, he may drop the ball occasionally; I have a few questions surrounding the backstory of "it", but these are small doubts that are forgiven once the film gets into gear and its everyday world becomes the source of a creeping fear that you just can't shake.

Is "it" a metaphor for the rise of STDs amongst teenagers? Perhaps; but in *It Follows* Mitchell has also delivered a genuinely original horror film – a rare enough thing – and in doing so has created a new monster to occupy our own personal darkness.

Mark McConnell

Fortean Times Verdict

CREEPING FEAR CONJURED FROM THE EVERYDAY WORLD 8

A Dark Reflection

Dir Tristan Loraine, UK 2015

On UK release from 27 February

Some people get into directing because they are great technicians, some because they have a great eye, some because they are frustrated actors. Then there is a select band who become directors because they have something to say. In this latter category is Tristan Loraine, the director and producer of *A Dark Reflection*, a conspiracy thriller that might facetiously be described as inhabiting the space between *All the President's Men* and *Watchdog*. It charts the murky waters of the aviation industry, specifically the health risks posed to passengers and crew and the efforts of the powers that be to cover up any evidence of a problem.

In films of this type there's always a crusading journalist, and in this case it's Helen Eastman (Georgina Sutcliffe), a former big league reporter reduced to working for a local rag in Sussex after a scoop in the Middle East goes horrifically wrong. When her boyfriend Joe, an air traffic controller, is suspended after a near-miss on his watch, she sniffs a story and along with cub reporter Natasha (Rita Ramnani) starts ferreting away after the truth (and some column inches). Naturally, this brings her to the attention of airline mogul Charles Jaspar (Nicholas Day), one of whose planes caused the incident, and his CEO Ben Tyrell (Mark Dymond), who begins to suspect his boss may be putting profit before safety.

During the course of her investigation Eastman encounters the widow (Leah Bracknell) of a pilot (Stephen Tompkinson) whose death was, he believed, caused by toxic organophosphates seeping into the air circulating inside the aircraft. It transpires that the source of the problem is oil leaks in the engine, an issue known to the airline and its engineers but one ignored because of the costs involved. She also hears from concerned hospital staff that abnormalities reported after routine procedures all involve aircrew.

Tristan Loraine was himself an airline captain until 2006 when he lost his medical certificate to fly because of the contaminated recycled air he was exposed to on commercial aircraft – the same air breathed by us whenever we travel by air. Since retraining at the National Film and Television School, Loraine has directed a number of documentaries about aviation, including 2007's *Welcome to Toxic Airlines*, an exposé of this alarming issue.

Unusually for a mainstream feature, *A Dark Reflection* is a co-operative production funded in part by a number of aviation organisations, including unions, support groups and, indeed, airline employees themselves. I understand that film industry bodies also helped get the project off the ground (if you'll pardon the pun). Given all this, you might expect the film to be a somewhat amateurish, patchwork affair, but I'm happy to report that it looks anything but, having the gloss of a major production. The aerial photography of Sussex is stunning, and most of the other footage seems to have been shot on actual locations, including Jordan for the arresting opening sequence.

To be honest, the script and some of the acting were less impressive, and this is where the limited means of the production begins to show. The main problem is that the characters are merely ciphers rather than fully drawn human beings; hardly uncommon in movie making, but less forgivable when the movie in question is based on fact. Aside from Crusading Journalist and Cub Reporter we also have, among others, Bad Rich Man, Conflicted Slightly Less Rich Man, Sinister Head of Security and Gruff But Kindly Editor. The film also borrows heavily from the iconography of its predecessors: newsrooms, oak-panelled drawing rooms, even a Deep Throat-approved dimly lit car park. As a consequence, it's hard to escape the feeling that you've seen it all before.

Having said that, I admired the low-key Britishness of it all. It might be a bit clunky, but there's something admirable about its refusal to chuck in car chases, sex scenes, torture, skydiving or other such Hollywood fripperies. I also liked the fact that the story is almost entirely driven by female characters, which is something all too rare outside of films involving bonnets and stately homes. It also generates considerable tension all the way through to an unexpected but satisfying finale.

In the end, the film is a tribute to Tristan Loraine's desire to get his story told in a format that will expose the scandalous issue at its heart to the widest possible audience. I think it's fair to say that Loraine isn't a born film director but a man who through sheer hard work and force of will turned himself into one because he believes, rightly in my view, that he has something to say which we all need to hear.

Daniel King

Fortean Times Verdict

A BUMPY FLIGHT BUT A SAFE LANDING 6

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth **REVEREND PETER LAWS** dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! (www.theflicksthatchurchforgot.com; @revpeterlaws)

VINCENT PRICE IN SIX GOTHIC TALES

Dir Roger Corman, US 1960-1964

Arrow Films, £84.99 (Blu-ray)

Now don't get me wrong. I'm a fan of Boris Karloff, I enjoy Bela Lugosi and I've got a particular soft spot for Lon Chaney Jr. (that sad, mopey face gets me every time). But if you're asking me who's the outstanding American horror actor, it's Mr Vincent Price. Maybe it's the variety of his output, or his earnest approach to horror; perhaps it's his fun, spooky elegance, or just that wonderful voice... Whatever it is, Price is the sort of actor that makes you smile the second his name flicks up on the opening credits. Imagine the treat then, of seeing that happen no less than six times in Arrow Video's new boxset *Vincent Price in Six Gothic Tales*.

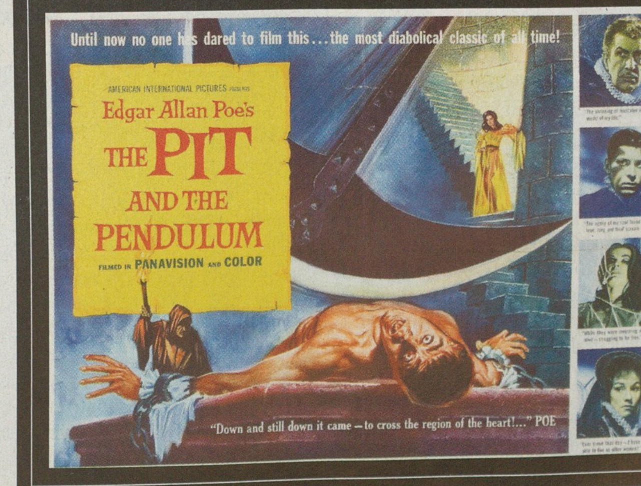
It contains almost a week's worth of Edgar Allen Poe films produced and directed by king of the B-Movies, Roger Corman. First up is *The Fall of the House of Usher*, in which a bleached blonde Price winces at the loud noises in his crumbling house. It's a rich, sumptuous production with the actor in fine, paranoid form as he struggles to cope with his family curse. After the success of *Usher*, Corman chose to film the relatively slight story *The Pit and the Pendulum* (no doubt encouraged by the poster potential of a huge swinging blade slicing into a man's stomach). Yet Richard Matheson's inventive script pulls together a new framing tale that's absorbing and spooky – and it has a killer final image.

Keen to experiment with the series, Corman replaced Price with Ray Milland for *The Premature Burial* (not included in this set). Then, Price was back with the anthology horror *Tales of Terror*, where he takes on not one but three of Poe's stories. Corman, (who has admitted that he gets bored easily) opted for a comedy vibe for the middle story. It was a vibe he expanded to feature length for the next film: *The Raven*. It's a bonkers detour in the cycle, full of duelling magicians and amusing, if dated, visual effects.

The fifth entry may be named after Poe's poem *The Haunted Palace*, but it moves far more into the territory of HP Lovecraft, taking much of its plot from his novella *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. With an intense opening and a nice sense of menace throughout, it's a welcome change of pace. The final film of the set feels like a literal breath of fresh air, after all the studio-based antics of the previous five. *The Tomb of Ligeia* was shot in England using real locations, including Stonehenge. It's creepy too, with widower Price (in funky sunglasses) discovering that his dead wife isn't too thrilled about him 'moving on'.

Once again, Arrow delivers some delicious prints and enjoyable extras, although I suspect Corman's Poe cycle won't be to everybody's tastes. The relentless studio-based approach (up until the final movie) feels claustrophobic and at times too stagey. Perhaps this is why I prefer Price in *Theatre of Blood* and the *Phibes* movies, which have a sense of scale and reality to them. Also, I confess that I struggle with *The Raven*, scratching my head at its bizarre tone; I have friends who adore this film, though, so what do I know?..

Still, if you've a taste for the very distinctive cocktail of Poe/Price/Corman, then Arrow have served up a gothic feast for the senses. (Note: If you're looking for Corman and Price's fabulous version of *Masque of the Red Death* it is sadly not present in this collection.)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Fortean Times Verdict

THE CORMAN/PRICE POE CYCLE OFFERS UP A GOTHIC FEAST 8

The Walking Dead: Season Four

Dir various, US 2014

Entertainment One, £19.99 DVD, £24.99 Blu-ray

It's very much a case of unfinished business in Season Four of *The Walking Dead*. For a start, there are loose and bloody ends to be tied, left over from David Morrisey's Governor-dominated Season Three.

You know Rick's hope of leading a quiet life with his growing family of survivors isn't destined for success. He has relinquished his role of leader, along with his gun and the violence that goes along with it, intent on showing his son Carl the right way: tending the garden of their prison-cum-fortress – while zombies roam beyond the fences – instead of cultivating outbursts of unfettered savagery in his offspring in order to survive. The theme that came to the fore in Season Three – man's inhumanity to man – is developed more broadly here, and the greatest threats come from other, uninfected survivors rather than the zombies.

Multiple storylines spin out and entire episodes are more frequently divided between the travails of just a few of the protagonists, eventually circling back to the main plotline of Andrew Lincoln's Rick Grimes and his struggle to retain a sense of humanity and morality in an appalling post-apocalyptic world. What Season Four manages to do better than any previous ones is to show how people are irrevocably changed in the face of such a living nightmare. The weak become strong, or perish; the strong move beyond the pale into outright barbarism, prepared to *do* the unthinkable in the face of the unthinkable.

All roads lead to Terminus, the mysterious destination mentioned in a radio broadcast the group pick up, promising sanctuary for any remaining survivors. All those unresolved threads left over from last season are intertwined in the Terminus arc: Michonne heading out alone on horseback to try and track down the Governor, who disappeared after the savage showdown at the end of the previous series; the Governor himself, meeting up with a woman and her daughter among a band of other survivors, creating for himself the persona of 'Brian', far removed from the psychotic one-eyed monster we all knew from last season. More of his backstory is explored here, as is his unquenchable hatred of Rick and his group and his determination to exterminate them. But, before all this, a virus infects the prison, the focus of the opening episodes, and leads to a reckoning between Rick and Carol (Melissa McBride) after she changes irrevocably in order to survive.

The mid-season finale is well worth the wait, the showdown between Rick's group and the one now manipulated and led by the Governor involving a tank, armfuls of firearms and a series regular or two who don't walk away from all the ensuing carnage. The prison is overrun with the undead and the group riven and scattered.

The second half of the season presents some standout individual episodes: 'Still', in which Daryl and Beth bond with each other over moonshine and pyromania, and 'The Grove' in which the new Carol, now the antithesis of Rick, has to deal with the disturbed nature of Lizzie and her dangerous fascination with the walkers.

The introduction of gun-toting Abraham, his militaristic girlfriend Rosita and the gnomic odd-bod scientist Eugene, who, Abraham explains, can save the world if only they can get him alive to Washington, goes on to provide the core storyline for the first half of Season Five.

Some gave up on *The Walking Dead* during Season Two when show creator Frank Darabont walked from the enterprise and the extended sojourn on the farm tried the patience of even the most die-hard fans. But then we got the extended horn-locking of the two alpha males, Rick and the Governor, with lashings of human nastiness in Season Three. This is surpassed by Season Four, with even stronger writing and a telling awareness on the writers' part not to let situations outstay their welcome.

It's good to report that Season Five, airing on UK television right now, has picked up superbly where this one left off. When the true nature of Terminus is finally revealed, I can promise you that it's well worth the wait.

Nick Cirkovic

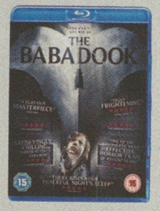
Fortean Times Verdict

FOUR SEASONS IN, AND TWD IS STILL WALKING TALL **8**

SHORTS

THE BABADOOK

Icon Home Entertainment, £15.99 (Blu-ray), £12.99 (DVD)



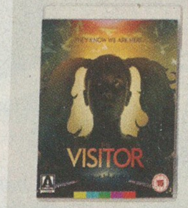
This film from Australian writer/director Jennifer Kent is undoubtedly one of the best horror movies of recent years, its potentially wider appeal beyond the usual genre fans demonstrated by a premiere at Sundance last year and a positive reception from the mainstream press.

Amelia (Essie Davis) is a tired and lonely widow, haunted by the death of her husband, working long shifts as a hospital orderly and struggling to bring up her difficult seven-year-old son, Samuel (Noah Wiseman). Samuel, for his part, is an imaginative boy, obsessed with magic tricks and terrified by the idea that a monster is going to get into their house – a fear that leads him to start creating his own home-made weapons to protect his mother. His increasingly difficult behaviour – screaming fits, convulsions and breaking his cousin's nose – see him thrown out of school and pushing an already stressed Amelia to her limit. Increasingly alienated from friends and family, mother and child retreat into their tatty, too-big Victorian house where a mysterious storybook entitled *Mister Babadook* turns up on the shelf and casts a disturbing spell on both of them: disturbing events soon suggest that the bat-like Babadook is more than just a grim fairytale… but is this a real haunting, a poltergeist incursion, or some form of *folie à deux*? Kent, building slowly from subtle unease to all-out terror, keeps things provocatively ambiguous for the most part; it's hard to tell, at times, whether we're watching a latter-day *Exorcist* (William Friedkin said he'd "never seen anything more terrifying") or *Repulsion* if Mia Farrow had a kid, and the film references a wider range of fantastic cinema – from Melies to *Nightmare on Elm Street*, via German Expressionism of *Caligari* and *Nosferatu* – in exploring its own possibilities.

It's not perfect – the Babadook's leap from pop-up picture book to screen presence is problematic, both visually (too much Tim Burton feyness to terrify) and metaphorically – but the film's strengths are undeniable: a script that makes you care for the two central characters; direction and cinematography that create not just chills but a palpable sense of emotional suffering; and incredibly strong performances from Davis and Wiseman that anchor the whole thing in a devastating, entirely recognisable emotional reality. Horror often prides itself on transgression and taboo-breaking – usually just a *post hoc* justification for a mash-up of blood and tits – but Kent's film, despite the occasional lapse, is certainly brave in even airing the *really* taboo topic of parent-on-child violence and getting us sufficiently under the skins of mother and son to understand what's happened to them and to care about the outcome. **David Sutton** **8/10**

THE VISITOR

Eureka!, £15.99 (Dual Format Edition)



Another creepy kid and more references to *The Exorcist* – not to mention *The Omen* and other 1970s hits – but *The Vistor* (1979) is as far from *The Babadook* as it's possible to get. Confirming Italian genre movie-making as *la gazza ladra* of film, Giuulio Paradisi shamelessly plunders American cinema to give us (I kid you not) John Huston, Sam Peckinpah, Glenn Ford, Mel Ferrer, Shelley Winters and a bemused looking young Lance Henrikson in a completely bonkers religio-SF-horror epic to which words cannot possibly do justice. Just see it – or, maybe, don't. **DS** **5/10**

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ROOMMATES of the DARK

INTERVIEW **DANIEL SIMPSON, DIRECTOR OF *THE RENDLESHAM UFO INCIDENT***

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY...

The Rendlesham UFO Incident is a new film that uses Britain's most famous UFO case – often described as the 'British Roswell' – as the basis for a spooky contemporary tale of three metal detectorists who find more than they bargained for deep in the Suffolk woods. **DAVID SUTTON** spoke to writer and director **DANIEL SIMPSON** about bringing the Rendlesham mythos to the big screen 35 years on...

It's surprising, given its high profile in the UFO literature and public consciousness, that no one has made a film based on the 1980 Rendlesham Forest Incident (RFI) before. What gave you the idea of doing one, and how did you get it off the ground?

I'd always wanted to make a UFO film since becoming interested in the subject as a child. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and later *Fire in the Sky* fuelled this interest when I began making films at a very early age. It wasn't until I moved to Suffolk, however, that I found out about Rendlesham and the famous UFO incident. The fact that it was a 10-minute drive away was incredibly exciting as I was looking for a new film project and had already considered doing an 'earthy' UFO film a couple of years earlier – a film about the mysterious objects people film on their mobile phones, rather than one that tries to offer an explanation of what might be flying them. As soon as I went to the forest and drove around Bentwaters my imagination started to run riot. The locations were excellent and were just screaming out to be filmed. I'd also wanted to make a film about treasure hunters, so I married the two ideas and pitched it to producers Laurie Cook and Jason Newmark in London; they decided to do it, right there and then.

There's an extensive literature on Rendlesham, ranging from witness accounts and MoD files to a great many subsequent books and TV documentaries. What sort of research did you do into the history of the case?

Endless amounts! Reading on the Internet most of all, coupled with the luxury of being able to go to the forest on a regular basis. This continued throughout the several years it took to make the film, during which I often had a set of keys from the Forestry Commission, so I had free range over the place to endlessly explore. Then about a year in, I read *Left at East Gate* [Larry Warren's account of the Rendlesham Incident] and it changed my perception of everything – I was suddenly a full-on believer! I realised I wanted to further sculpt the film to reflect some of the reports in the book. I knew that even though our film wasn't the story of the actual events of the RFI, I had to respect any parts that we had decided to use. I also knew that at some point I would come face to face with USAF witnesses.

And did you?

In 2012, halfway through the production, and after reading *Left at East Gate*, I went on my own to a RFI conference in Woodbridge. Larry Warren and Peter Robbins were both there and I desperately wanted to tell them about the film, but because it wasn't yet clear how the film's marketing would work, I was advised against it at the time. Having said that, I did approach Larry and tell him I was sort of doing something but he probably thought I was some kind of nutter and didn't pay much attention. Anyway, I had a photo taken of us both outside the building and it's been in a frame on my office wall ever since. He was the exact person I had expected to meet from reading his book – a genuine and honest guy.

So another two years went by where we continued to shoot, and edit. Then in 2014, just as we had finished the film, there was another RFI conference in Woodbridge that I again attended. I sat at the back and said hello to Larry, who wouldn't have recognised me from the first time. This time, more than the first, I really wanted to reveal that we had made a film, but again we were waiting for a kind of official type announcement. Jim Pennsiston and Charles Halt were both contacted by the producers to obtain permission to use the 'Halt tape' and a drawing, but I've never spoken to either.

Obviously, there's disagreement about what went on during those December days in Suffolk. Even those who were actually there can't agree on what really happened, and then you have the believers and sceptics fighting it out over whether anything happened at all. Does this present a problem for any fictional take on the case? Is there a risk that those with passionate beliefs in particular versions of events might reject anything that doesn't tally with their own interpretation?

We never set out to make a film based on what happened in 1980. If we had done, I'd probably still be trying to write the script and fighting to raise the money to make it. We had to find a concept that would make for a contemporary angle, to hook into the original event. Of course, there are going to be disgruntled people out there who will say that this film is nothing to do with the original story, and there are those who will be angry because we didn't suggest that it was a lighthouse that caused the incidents. You can't please all the people all of the time! One thing the film does state clearly though is this: that what was seen in 1980 was of extraterrestrial origin and that there was a subsequent cover-up.

The two male characters, Gus and Jake, seem to embody the believer/sceptic divide. Was that your way of acknowledging, as well as dramatising, the above?

Yes absolutely. Most people look to the rational explanation when confronted with the unknown, and this was the way Gus operated. It's also the key to creating conflict on screen.

The Gus character offers some well-known 'sceptical' explanations for some of what the characters see and hear – the "animals going crazy" and screaming sounds are muntjac deer; weird lights and sonic booms are the military testing advanced tech – do you find these, and other theories involving Orford Lighthouse or misidentified planets convincing?

These theories are ridiculous and are an insult to intelligent people. We all know that lighthouses do not fly into forests. You only have to listen to the Halt tape to know that it was neither of the above.

The three characters are treasure hunters – two metal detectorists and a film-maker – rather than UFO nuts. What was the basis of that decision?

It was just too fake a concept to have UFO hunters go to a well-known UFO location and see UFOs. This is probably the way Hollywood would have done it, but we wanted something more believable. There's also this parallel in the film where both the treasure hunters and the unseen aliens are looking for something that has been lost beneath the ground. Something precious. It also transpires that the treasure hunters do find something of great value – but it's not what they've been looking for.

The film's locations – a very eerie-looking RAF Bentwaters, for instance – are absolutely crucial to its look and feel. What was it like shooting in the area that the original events took place?

It was a real buzz. We were at Bentwaters on numerous occasions and at all hours of the day and night. Sometimes, when I was on my own, or with just one of the actors we would get into some of the old disused buildings and explore them with a torch, filming as we went. This experience was both fascinating and at times scary. Ultimately, I was always searching for new evidence about the case, and looking for doors that led to sub-level structures. Filming in Rendlesham Forest was always a thrill, especially over three weeks of night filming. I also filmed inside MoD Woodbridge, but none of that footage made it into the finished edit, except for shots through the fence.

This is a 'found footage' movie – why did you decide to take it in this direction and how did it affect the rest of the film-making process, from scripting and casting to shooting and editing?

Personally I would have preferred to make the film as a non-'found footage' film but the producers wanted it to be of that genre, which was very much in fashion back then, in 2010 when we started. It was a great challenge, and I can honestly say that it's much harder than the usual technique of shooting. But doing it this way was also very exciting because it gave us a legitimate reason for ploughing straight into production without a solid screenplay. Casting was all about finding the right three actors who were not known to the public through any other productions. They were judged on their talents to improvise mainly, and whether or not they would be able to handle the unorthodox method of filming we were about to take up with them. After many improvised tests we went straight into filming. We had a rough screenplay and we allowed the actors to go off into the forest and film themselves – but they were never told what the story was or what to expect from a scene. They were only given rough guidelines to the scene so that the results would seem natural and un-scripted. They were also given a GPS and issued with markers that they had to find. We would drop them in the middle of the forest at night and let them find their way around in the dark as they filmed themselves. Sometimes we would ambush them and scare the living hell out of them. This all amounted to around 100 hours of footage by the end of the production, and all the time we were filming and editing and re-writing and re-filming, gradually crafting the footage into a story and trying to introduce visual effects along the way.

It makes for an interesting mixture of generic elements we don't often see – an odd mix of typically lo-fi hand-held style and really quite impressive visual effects. Was that something you were consciously aiming for?

Were you inspired by any other films?

I've always been inspired by the greats: directors like Polanski, Kurosawa and Tarkovsky. It was, however, *The Blair Witch Project* that inspired certain aspects of the film. Like the work of the above directors, it has a purity to it that we wanted to achieve. Recent 'found footage' films were becoming increasingly slick and being shot with expensive cameras with prime lenses. We absolutely wanted our film to look like it had been made by amateurs – therefore the script, the camerawork, the sound and the editing had to respect this idea. For example, when we came to do the sound mix in London, we purposely left in all the bad bits you would normally take out. The whole film was carefully designed in this way in terms of both visual and sound elements.

Two of your producers, Jason Newmark and Laurie Cook, have been involved with a number of previous indie British horror movies, like *Creep* and *Severance*. Was their input a big help with a project such as this?

A massive help throughout. They really know their subject and were very passionate about keeping to our original goals with the film. Laurie Cook was on set with me the whole time and we exchanged about 50,000 emails throughout the years it took to make the film.

What do you think happened at Rendlesham in December 1980?

I believe that a craft of extraterrestrial origin landed in Rendlesham Forest and was seen by multiple witnesses including Larry Warren and Lt Col Charles Halt. Other than that, I have no answers to what it was doing there or whence it came. I also believe that somewhere there exists film and photographic evidence that was taken at the time – but we will never get to see it.

***The Rendlesham UFO Incident* is at selected UK cinemas from 6 Feb and on DVD on 9 Feb 2015.**

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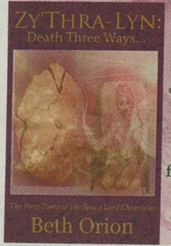

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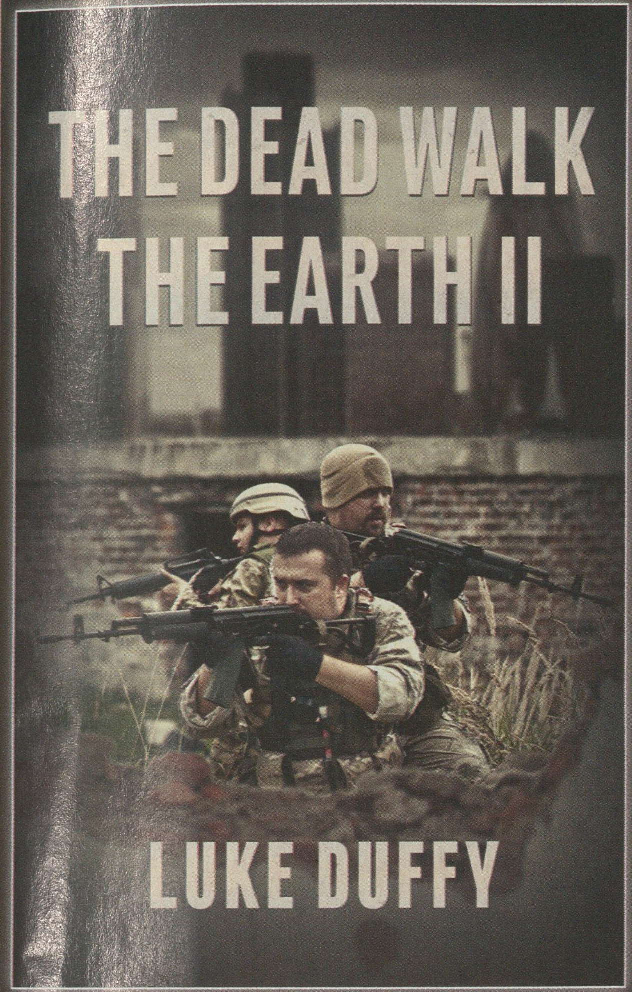

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Dear FT...

letters

Alien skeleton

Re: the 'alien' found under floorboards [**FT322:8**]: I'm pretty sure it's just a rat or mouse skeleton with the skull rotated 180° so that it's looking backwards – you can see the rodent's teeth at the 'back' of the head.

Tim Clegg
Marlow, Buckinghamshire

The sweet little alien skeleton lookalike is probably a rat – or maybe a mouse – albeit with its head turned around, a hunched back and its front legs missing. But, apart from missing limbs, it really does make a great 'Mini-me' for Geiger's creation. Simulacra Corner would have been a better place for the photo.

Kate Parsons
By email

Editor's note: Thanks to Mike Diamond and Jez Vause, who also pointed out the alien's rodent identity, which I really should have noticed myself.

Closing the wood

There is no mystery about the sign stating that Dumble Woods in Derbyshire will be closed for one day a year [**FT322:69**]. This is a common practice used by landowners in order to prevent members of the public claiming a 'right of way' through uninterrupted use, usually for a period of 20 years. The upper part of the sign (partly obscured by leaves) clearly refers to this.

George Brown
By email

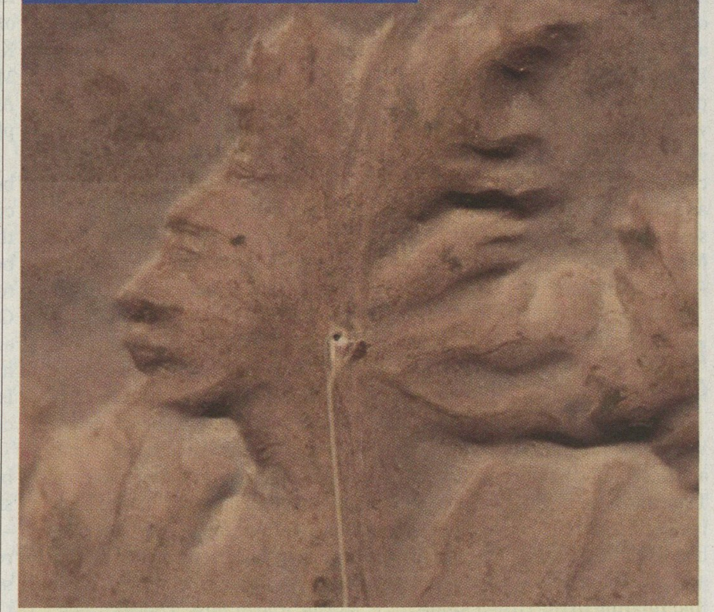
Editor's note: Thanks to Carl Ashton-Lomax, Joel Conn and Martin Jenkins for making the same point.

Sacrificial lamb

I suspect that the supposed 'dog' on a plate depicted in Lincoln Cathedral's stained glass window of the Last Supper – reproduced in Ted Harrison's Fortean Traveller article on the building [**FT322:75**] – is really a lamb, representing both the Paschal Lamb of an actual Jewish Passover meal and also Jesus as the Lamb of God. We are more used to such symbolic lambs in Christian art being shown in an idealised form but in this case, I suggest, the artist has illustrated the lamb more realistically as stripped and cooked for the table, thus creating the dog-like appearance. It seems to me to be a shocking but brilliant way of hinting, in a deceptively simple image, at the sacrifice of Christ that is to come.

Daniel Kitto
Norwich, Norfolk

Simulacra corner



Simon Woolley came upon this Google Earth image in southern Canada, and thought it resembled a Native American listening to an iPod.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them to the PO box above (with a stamped addressed envelope or international reply coupon) or to sieveking@forteantimes.com – and please tell us your postal address.

Trapped in certainty

Re David V Barrett's Forum piece on skeptics/sceptics [**FT322:52**]: either people are comfortable living with uncertainty or they are not. Richard Dawkins and his friends are comfortable in their certainty. Any attempt at debate with them is a waste of time, since no way are they going to look at any evidence, scientific or otherwise, that might bring down their whole house of cards. I am a scientist and passionate about it. In common with most readers of *Fortean Times* I love living with uncertainty, the absolute fascination with all that we are yet to discover, the wonder of existence and its endless possibilities.

To those trapped in certainty I offer this quotation (I forget from where): "You only need to find one white crow to show that all crows aren't black".

Kevin New
Devon

Asthma and dreams

I have been reading your report on the link between carbon dioxide and Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). I have never had an NDE, but I do have very vivid dreams, including lucid dreams. I have quite severe asthma and the times I have had the bad dreams I have been having particular problems with asthma and have woken up suffocating – clogged with unexpelled carbon dioxide. I would love to hear readers' thoughts on this, and from anyone else who has noticed a link between asthma and dreams or visions.

Alice Hepple
Derby

Flat feet

Re the Mythchaser about flat feet [**FT322:19**] preventing would-be recruits from joining the military: according to my 95-year-old neighbour, you certainly couldn't join the Army during World War II with flat feet – a friend of his was turned down for such a condition. Also, according to wisegeek.org, the military regulations in the US specifically indicate that a person with flat feet does not meet the standards of physical requirements to serve in the military if the condition causes the person persistent and severe physical pain, or he/she needs to wear corrective footwear.

Nicola Maasdam
By email

Quoting from *Einstein: His Life and Universe* by Walter Isaacson (page 58): "[Einstein] was so eager to be a Swiss citizen that he put aside his antimilitary sentiments and presented himself, as required, for military service. He was rejected for having sweaty feet ('hyperidrosis ped'), flat feet ('pes planus'), and varicose veins ('varicosis'). The Swiss Army was, apparently, quite discriminating, and so his military service book was stamped 'unfit'."

Andrew May
Crewkerne, Somerset

Then there was the Noel Coward lyric "Don't take our Charlie for the Army": "He couldn't do route marches / on account of his fallen arches".

James Wright
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Fort fans

Reading David Stephen Calonne's new (2014) biography of Henry Miller (one of my A-List writers), I was reminded (pp96-7) that the latter, always keen on all things occult and paranormal, joined the Fortean Society in about 1945, and in a mixture of boast and complaint exclaimed in *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (p167): "People are constantly supplying me with startling facts, amazing events, incredible experiences – as if I were another Charles Fort."

Apropos this, there is a lengthy discussion in *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago, 2012), pp93-141, by Jeffrey Kripal who in an on-line interview remarks that he was tipped off to Fort by folklorist David Hufford, picked up a copy of *The Book of the Damned*, and "was immediately hooked".

Almost a case of the Roman proverb FORT-es Fortuna Iuvat.

Barry Baldwin
Calgary, Alberta

Cetacean weirdness

You report that a bicephalous (two-headed) dolphin found on a beach in western Turkey on 4 August 2014 is to be studied by associate professor of marine biology Mehmet Gokoglu at Akdeniz University, Antalya [**FT321:22**]. In fact, Prof Gokoglu appears to have been denied direct access to the remains, and only allowed to study photographs ("Doubts cast on two-headed dolphin," *<i>, 13 Aug 2014*).

In such reports of cetacean weirdness, there seems to be a recent trend towards congenital and genetic factors. I believe that reports of a bicephalous humpback whale calf, found on a Californian beach in 2013, also generated some doubt. In October 2012, the ITV quiz programme *The Chase* asked what kind of creature a whalphin was. The correct answer was, of course, a cross between a whale and a dolphin. Has anyone ever seen such a hybrid?

Nick Warren
Pinner, Middlesex

Paulus.
"DELIVERY, SIR. THE COUP DE GRACE

PAUL TAYLOR

Dr Who and the Green Stone

While reading the excellent article 'Doctor Who: Forteana in Time and Space' [**FT:318:34-39**], I noted the absence of any link between the Dr Who programmes and psychic questing, particularly that relating to the Green Stone Affair from 1979. In that year a number of psychics began to receive psychic messages relating to a mysterious green talismanic stone of power, said to have been hidden after the failure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 and allegedly owned by the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots. The Stone, according to a wealth of psychic information given to the researchers who were investigating these messages, originated at the time of the demise of the megalithic culture in the British Isles and was derived from Egypt at the time of the pharaoh Akhenaten, before finding its way to the British Isles and having at one time been possessed by the Knights Templar.

Acting on psychic messages and pursuing historical leads, the Parasearch team were first led to a bridge in the Black Country where a short sword was discovered, which then led them to finding a 17th-century casket containing the Green Stone by the River Severn in Worcestershire. Again, following psychic messages, the Stone was charged up at various megalithic sites before being used to defeat a spiritual evil of indeterminate nature.

There are interesting synchronicities between these events and the Dr Who episodes called 'The Key to Time', which ran from September 1978 to February 1979, shortly before the first psychic messages relating to the green Meonia Stone in October 1979. 'The Key to Time' of the Dr Who series was a powerful and legendary artefact that the Guardians of Time used to maintain control over universal chaos. The artefact itself was split into six pieces and the Doctor had to engage in quests to assemble the pieces. This is remarkably similar to the Green Stone, which not only held a supernatural power but was also regarded as being the Philosopher's Stone. Like Dr Who, the Parasearch team was later instructed by a paranormal source (that manifested itself on several occasions as a White Lady or Guardian) to engage in psychic quests to discover other stones, amongst them a red stone known as the 'Eye of Fire'. These stones were considered to represent the Sephirot of the Kabbalah.

The Fourth Doctor is visited by a White Guardian who is told that he must recover all six pieces in order to restore balance to the Universe, although he is warned of the opposition from a Black Guardian. Again, those engaged in the quest for both the Green Stone and the Eye of Fire were opposed by dark spiritual forces, frequently using humans as agents in an attempt to stop them.

The Doctor is recruited by the White Guardian to recover the six fragments, first in 'The Ribos Operation' where he is taken to the planet Ribos. Then in 'The Pirate Planet' he is taken to the planet Zanak to continue his quest. Then interestingly we have the third quest in 'The Stones of Blood', which is set on Earth. The Doctor, Romana and K9 find themselves by an ancient stone circle called the Nine Travellers. This stone circle was actually the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire. During the Green Stone quest the Parasearch team was led to the Rollright Stones and discovered evidence of its human opposition in the form of satanic rituals. The name 'Nine Travellers' is also interesting as the quest to charge up the Green Stone after its discovery was called the Nine Lights as it involved visiting nine particular megalithic sites with the Stone. The fourth quest is called 'The Androids of Tara', followed by 'The Power of Kroll' on the third moon of Delta Magna, while the sixth was 'The Armageddon Factor' located on the planet Atrious.

The Key of Time appears to have been a transdimensional crystalline cube comprising six segments. Like the Green Stone itself, its power had been diluted by being transferred to different locations, that of the Green Stone having been placed at each of nine megalithic sites when it had first arrived in the British Isles at the end of the megalithic culture.

Jenny Randles mooted the link between fiction and reality – which she termed 'psychic parallelism' – through synchronicity, when she recognised how Stephen Donaldson's fictional *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* seemed to mirror the real-life accounts of the experiences and even some of the personalities involved in 'The Green Stone' Affair. It seems that at times the ocean of imagery within the collective unconsciousness can meld into one and appear instantaneously as both works of fiction and as real-life events. (See *The Green Stone*, 1983, by Martin Keatman and Graham Phillips).

Clive Potter
Leicester

Foundation rite

In our family when we build a house, we always put a horse-skull in the north corner of the foundations. Back in 1960 when this house [in Swallowcliffe, Wiltshire] was built, I had no skull and I was a long way from my natal Pembrokeshire. However, I did find a horse tooth in the lab and thought that would do. It was a very short ceremony and the Irish labourers all took off their caps and crossed themselves. No one seemed surprised.

Why did I do it and what does it mean? I don't know. One can make up any stories but I did it anyway.

Patrick F James
Swallowcliffe, Wiltshire

The Comics Code

I've re-read 'Attack of the Poisonous Mushroom Growth' by R Guffey [**FT320:28-35**] a few times and cannot decide if he is trying to convince us that the introduction of the Comics Code is a case of mass hysteria, moral panic or just a conspiracy, of sorts.

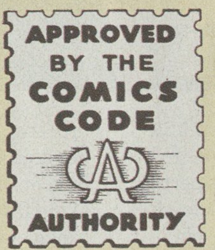
"Mass hysteria" is a term that's usually applied to cases where there is no rational or physical cause for a group's behaviour, aside from people feeding off of one another's fantasies; for instance, the numerous fainting spells that FT has covered. This was clearly not true of crime comics, many of which reflected some of society's worst fears right back at it. Meanwhile, the only "conspiratorial" force that I could discern at work here seems to be the conscious misrepresentation of the comic book genre by Dr Wertham. He does seem to have picked out the most offensive comics that he could find and held them up as examples of the medium as a whole. As a result, he got the support of a government which was trying to distract people from bigger problems... when is it not, though? Intelligent and thought-provoking comic books were undoubtedly censored alongside the sensationalist ones, but only because they contained storylines that paralleled very real, disturbing world events that people wanted to forget about.

In the 1950s, the memories of those events would have been very fresh in the minds of Americans, having touched 16 million of their lives in a very physical, real way. The depravities of the Holocaust, WWII and the capitulation which inspired comic books writers were all real events – not tricks of the imagination, as Guffey seems to suggest. Having witnessed and participated in them, much of the Western world would have been suffering from a form of collective PTSD. In fact, the rise in juvenile delinquency was probably caused by the fact that many parents were actively trying to bury their traumas, since no other outlet for it was offered by the society they lived in. But then, the 1950s were totally unlike modern times, when sharing one's thoughts on blogs, social media, talk shows and via counselling is as normal as breathing. The outward appearance of normality was rigidly prioritised by advertisers, employers and government, and so troubled adults had little choice but to look for an 'outsider' to blame for their ills. Seen this way, the public's excessive reaction to violent imagery seems inevitable, rather than conspiratorial. If it weren't for Dr Wertham, then someone else would surely have made the same criticisms that he did.

Dr Wertham's German origins are important to this story, but not for the reason Guffey seems to suggest (i.e. that Wertham was a closet fascist). Modern historians estimate that an estimated 1.4 million German women were raped by Allied troops during capitulation, and another 2 million Germans went missing or died during their relocation from Prussia immediately after it. Many of Wertham's countrymen and women were imprisoned and worked to death, as revenge for having started the war. The Germans who managed to survive this period were starved, diseased, crippled, and mentally ill. I have no doubt that Wertham's family and friends would have regaled him with horror stories about their lives during and after WWII. Meanwhile, the American press would have been regaling him with horror stories about what had happened in the concentration camps set up by Germans. It goes without saying that Wertham would have been a bit touchy on the subject of violence. He was in all likelihood riddled with overwhelming feelings of guilt, disgust, and fear of social breakdown. And as strongly as the subject of violence affected him, so it must have affected many other Americans with European friends and family, as well as those with loved ones serving overseas.

None of this excuses reactionary censorship, of course, but in order to understand why some people felt compelled to defend violent comics, while others felt compelled to ban them, it's first and foremost necessary to understand how wholly this society had been distorted by violence. The same could be said of the censorship debate in modern American society as well, although its violence stems from different sources.

Perhaps, then, the Comics Code could be viewed as the product of a moral panic of sorts? Again, the answer is conclusively 'no'. The term "moral panic" usually refers to situations where society is excessively worried about a fictional enemy (non-existent Satanic cults being the classic example). The events that were being recreated in comic books were clearly much more real. The only moral element that I can discern in this article comes from its author, who seems to be judging a long-gone society by the standards of a modern one.



I find it odd that Guffey doesn't respond to any of the criticisms made of the controversial comics that he is describing in his article. One comic book cover shows a melting face, which seems like a clear reference to napalm, which was first used during WWII; or to nuclear warfare, which was used infamously used by America against Japanese civilians; or to the many burn victims of the Blitz and other bombing attacks.

The comics shown in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, on the other hand, depict a female – her features so sexualised that she almost seems alien – being restrained and injected by two men. From a Freudian perspective, this could hardly be a clearer allusion to rape. Seeing the female form reduced to a sexual piece of furniture would have upset readers of these magazines for many other reasons, too. For one thing, many women had held skilled jobs during WWII, due to the shortage of men, only to be unceremoniously shunted back into the kitchens and boudoirs when their husbands returned home. It's very possible that these same women became touchy about sexism in comics for the same reason that Dr Wertham became touchy about violence: because they were a reminder of how far they'd fallen, in society's eyes. Not just society's eyes, but the eyes of their own children, too. If anything, this story illustrates how disempowered groups often go to extreme lengths to control the small part of society that they are 'allowed' to influence. That isn't fortean, though – it's Sociology 101.

When one considers the context of 1950s American society, the Comics Code comes across more as a trial-and-error process in which one generation tried to find a solution to the problems like violence, inequality, war and crime. The kids of the Fifties who witnessed their comics being burned only had to wait another decade to start implementing their own solution to those problems, vis-à-vis the peace movement. Perhaps all those years of watching their parents coping (or failing to cope) with the problems of inequality and war was what prompted the Sixties generation to come to a more subtle, approachable answer to the same problems. Perhaps if it had been allowed to internalise the misdemeanours of the preceding generation by reading crime comics that merely reflected problems instead of resolving them, then that generational self-analysis would never have happened.

Or maybe the more subversive comic book authors simply found other ways to keep on influencing young readers without resorting to gore. The Comics Code may even have inadvertently helped steer the kids of the 1950s toward a more sensitive and intelligent path by showing them the divisive effects of violence, whether real and imagined. All I know for sure is this: video games in which players can re-enact scenes of torture, rape and murder have been freely available for over two decades now, and America still hasn't experienced a second Summer of Love.

A Elliott
Berlin, Germany

letters

Know your onions

The facts behind weird new stories are often as interesting as the stories themselves. As a simple example of such hidden layers, I remember an FT Sideline about a Norwegian man who had been fined for calling a policeman an onion. This sounds strange – unless you know that 'onion' (løk) is a slang word for 'prick'. (I am deliberately translating it as 'prick', since it's only mildly offensive. Still, most people would avoid using it on a policeman.) In fact, this particular use of 'onion' is confined to the city of Bergen and its environs. Most other Norwegians would be unaware of its sexual connotations, which probably explains why your clipper bothered to submit it at all.

A related slang term is 'nappe løken' ('tugging the onion') – no prizes for guessing the meaning. I once tricked a guy I know at NRK (Norwegian State Broadcasting) into saying 'nappe løken' live on air on Norway's most popular radio programme. Like most inland Norwegians he didn't know the meaning, but he was quickly informed by his listeners. He was not very pleased, but at this time the NRK had stopped using my services anyway, so it didn't matter.

Nils Erik Grande
By email

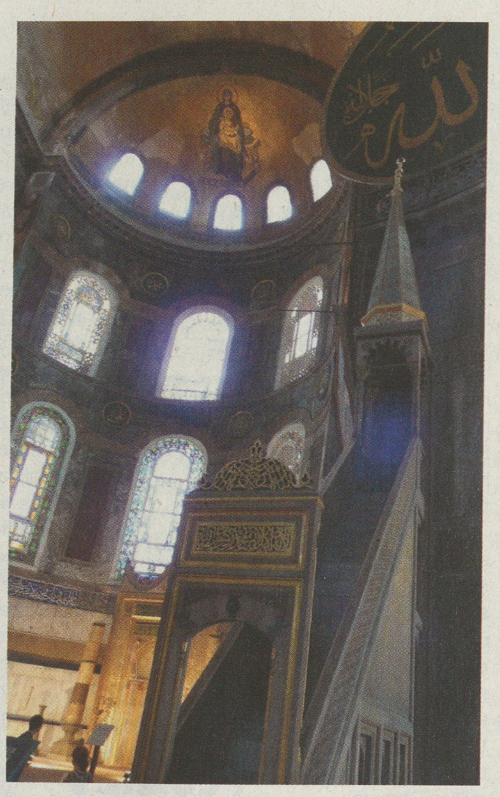
Black-Eyed Ghosts

I wonder if one possible influence on the spate of lurid headlines in the British tabloid media about Black-Eyed Ghost Children [**FT322:31**] might be convicted gangland murderer Dale Cregan. Cregan, sentenced to whole-life imprisonment in June 2013 for four killings including those of two female police officers, sports an obsidian glass eye, which lends an even more sinister aspect to his already menacing appearance. Reports of Cregan's crimes, attempts to escape the authorities, arrest, conviction and subsequent antics behind bars have been regular tabloid headline fodder for the past couple of years. Such articles are invariably accompanied by photos of the "one-eyed killer" and his eerie obsidian appendage, together with varying lurid accounts of how he lost his eye. Knowing how tabloid editors operate, it would not be a surprise if having found a successful formula with one black-eyed bogeyman, the possibility of combining black eyes, ghosts and lost children appeared to be a sure-fire winner. Expect to see killer black-eyed ghost spiders from hell thrown into the mix some time very soon!

Mark Graham
Huddersfield, West Yorkshire

Black-Eyed Kids [**FT322:26-32**] is a real phenomenon but to turn it into a paranormal one is a joke, right? Google "Black Eye Contacts": you can be a BEK yourself. Would you like your full eye blacked out or just the partial pupil? So many fashion choices! Fashion contact lenses are big business judging by the large number of companies offering them. I'm guessing especially with younger people, hence the descriptive 'Kids'.

Mark Fossey
By email



Sacre bleu!

A few years ago in Istanbul I snapped this digital photo (above) inside the Hagia Sophia. The ultraviolet at the top of the minbar still startles me, and makes me wonder: was the minbar (surely one of the largest in the world) built so that the 'natural' ultraviolet glow would envelop the speaker, a sort of Muslim noon blue apples? Or is it a revenant of some kind? Or just marsh gas? I will let you decide.

John Eastman
By email

Satanic Intervention

I think the comments about Bigfoot and giants in "Devilish critters" [**FT318:72**] are rather far-fetched. Firstly, referring back to "Hairy cousins?" [**FT308:8**], earlier drafts of a so-called study into Bigfoot DNA claimed that some of the DNA possibly came from "angels", which was not only considered ludicrous by other Bigfoot researchers at the time but the author refused to release her data, explain her methodology or reveal where she might have acquired "angel" DNA to make comparisons in the first place. Indeed, if "angel" DNA existed, this would imply that instead of possessing ethereal bodies, angels must have very corporeal bodies, more akin to extraterrestrials. Leaving aside the obvious phantasmagorical nonsense in accepting the biblical account of the Flood as literal fact, to say that Classical sculptures of monstrous beasts offer proof of their existence is nonsensical, given that the more likely explanation is that they are simply misinterpretations or misrepresentations of existing wildlife. Creationists are very supportive of cryptozoology because of their mistaken belief that finding a living cryptid or prehistoric species is somehow proof that evolution does not occur.

Why would so-called Satan (or rather some vindictive extraterrestrial) waste his time playing Frankenstein with living creatures and implanting his "evil" to make some bizarre menagerie for future cryptozoologists to study? What about *Tyrannosaurus rex* and the dinosaurs, and other prehistoric oddities stomping around before man existed? Did Satan engineer them too? Does that mean that apart from the occasional cryptid, Satan also created everything that is brutish and nasty in the animal world or that bites and stings or is possibly harmful to mankind? By the same logic, venomous snakes and spiders, poisonous toads and even stinging nettles have been deliberately engineered by Satan and contaminated with his "evil" in order to afflict mankind, so too parasitic organisms and mosquitoes. Furthermore, skunks are definitely satanic in origin, given their awful stink, and Great White Sharks and other man-eating animals are obviously possessed by demonic entities and in urgent need of exorcism.

Finally, supposedly glowing red eyes (i.e. eye shine) is nothing unusual in animals seen at night, given the reflective capabilities of the tapetum lucidum in the eyes of nocturnal animals. Also, animals that exude a powerful stink is nothing new (e.g. skunks); even dogs love to roll about in something dead or rotting in order to hide their scent, let alone the wet fur smell of some cryptid like Skunk Ape that lives in a smelly swamp and doesn't bathe. And are we to assume that the sulphurous smell of smelly farts is a sign of demonic possession?

David Keyworth
Maryborough, Australia

Editor's note: I think this is case of a sledgehammer employed to crack a nut. I never expected anyone – or at least any FT reader – to take seriously the speculations of Patrick Heron (summarised by Greg May in his letter "Devilish critters"), any more than David Icke's 'revelations' about giant lizards ruling the world. However, the contemplation of such metaphysical flapdoodle is one of the primary – and pleasurable – tasks of this publication. I am reminded of Ken Campbell's 'science-fictional' way of seeing the world – replacing 'believing' with 'supposing'.

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it happened to me...

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First-hand accounts from *Fortean Times* readers and browsers of www.forteantimes.com

Friendly half-smile

In the early 2000s I was living in a small studio flat in an old house in the east end of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. There was a short period of time when I would awake with the strong feeling that a woman and her two children were sitting on the end of my bed watching me. It continued for a few weeks, always around 6am, but I saw nothing and would eventually just go back to sleep.

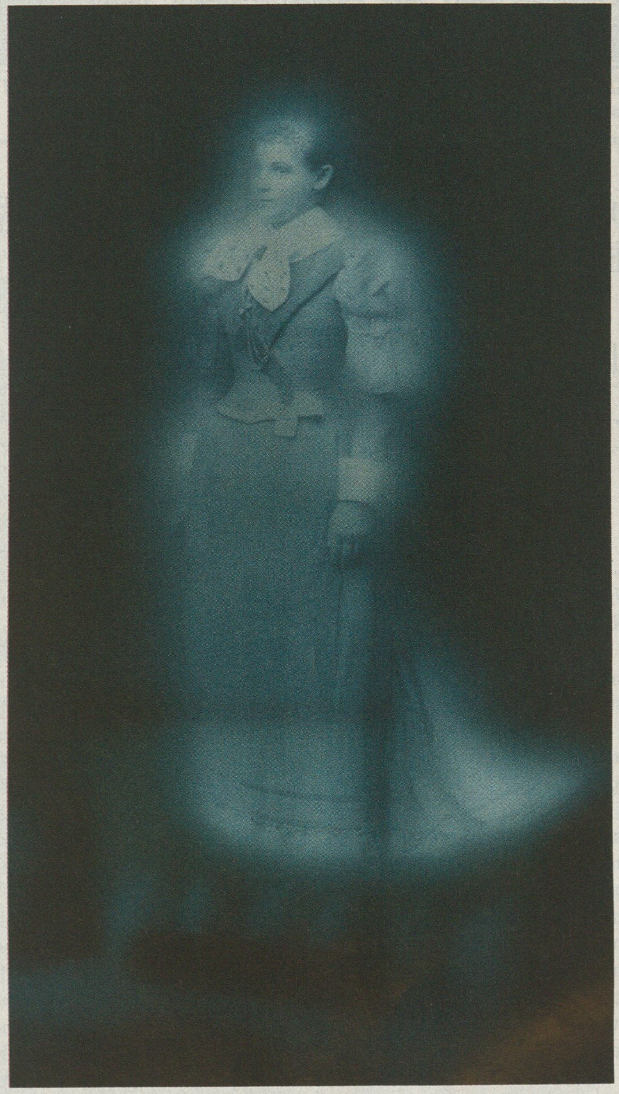
Then one day I was quite upset and had gone home to be miserable about it. On trying to sleep I found I couldn't, and started to get the distinct feeling not all was right in the room. The next thing I remember I was sitting bolt upright in bed with no recall of sitting up and without the ability to move. A woman dressed in Victorian-era clothes appeared through the wall across from me and seemed to float over the floor towards me. I remember feeling panicked but amazed. I tried to speak and although I could hear myself I could not hear any audible sound coming from me; it was like screaming but with no sound. The woman had a firm but friendly half-smile and came up very close to my face. She stayed there looking at me for what seemed like hours. Eventually she turned and left the same way she had arrived. Suddenly I could move again and the atmosphere felt normal. I felt no menace from her; in fact after she had gone I slept like a log – but I did put the light on!

I told some people over the coming weeks and most thought me crazy. However, when my brother-in-law heard the story he admitted that while he and my sister had stayed in my flat some months previously he had awoken in the night to see a woman of the same description sitting on the end of the bed staring at him. He put the cover over his head and went back to sleep. He hadn't told me as I lived alone and he didn't want to scare me.

A month or so later, a friend of mine who lived in the flat above called a plumber out. As soon as he entered the building he told her he was also a psychic and that a girl fitting her description had seen a female ghost in the building. My friend denied it, but the plumber chatted away to her whilst plumbing about how a girl who had been researching her real grandfather had seen this ghost and that time was not how most people thought it to be. He went on to say that there was a message for the girl and that she should explore automatic writing and psychic abilities. After the plumber left it suddenly clicked in my friend's head whom he had been talking about, as my project at the time had indeed been research on my grandfather; also, my friend and I looked very similar. She relayed all this information to me and passed on the card he had left. I called the number on it (it was Spanish) and I got what I understand to be the Spanish message for "You have dialled an incorrect number".

I still have the card and absolutely no one believes me when I tell this story. I am a writer of short stories with a lifelong interest in forteana, plus my Masters degree was based on a book of ghost stories, so perhaps they feel I am spinning a tale for effect. But this experience was quite real and completely changed the way I look at reality.

Heather Jane Tanner
By email



"A woman dressed in Victorian-era clothes appeared through the wall and seemed to float towards me"

Nocturnal bangs

I recently had a strange experience whilst in bed. I must explain that I have a 25 per cent hearing loss and suffer from tinnitus as well, normally a roaring sound like wind in the trees. Whether this is a factor I cannot say. One evening I had gone to bed at the usual time, around 10pm. It is quite common for me to read in bed for up to an hour but more often 20 minutes or so. I put my book down and turned off the light and believe I might have fallen asleep or at least was just dropping off. I was still sitting up with a couple of pillows behind me. All of a sudden there was a tremendous bang on my left-hand side as though a large-calibre pistol had been discharged close by. I have discharged black powder blanks in a solid barrelled replica of an old 1850 Navy Colt revolver in the past, and this mystery bang was just as loud in a confined space.

I have no recollection of dreaming beforehand; what struck me was the intensity of the noise – it was so real. I got out of bed looked out the double-glazed window to see if someone had thrown a loud firecracker into my back garden, even though I am certain that the bang was within the confines of the bedroom. My wife was asleep in the front bedroom and I asked her in the morning if she had heard a loud bang in the night. She hadn't. I had never experienced this before and not since although my left ear's inner workings have given me the occasional balance problems and the doctor told me a long while ago I may have a mild form of Menier's disease, which may worsen with age. I decided it had to be a malfunction of my inner ear or perhaps an unrecalled dream.

A week or two later I got a taxi out of Brecon town as was normal on a Saturday after the weekly shopping. My usual taxi driver also has hearing problems but he suffers no tinnitus as I do. I had never mentioned my experience to him. In conversation he suddenly said the other night he was in bed and he was suddenly startled by a loud bang like a pistol shot. He began describing how intense it was and was puzzled how it had not woken his wife. I told him how I had had a similar experience recently. I don't know if he believed me or not. He had never experienced it before. This strange synchronicity makes it the more incredible.

Maybe it is something that can happen particularly to deaf people – I don't know. My father was very deaf but I never remember him telling of any such incident. I was both intrigued and a little spooked. Has any other reader had similar experiences or is there an invisible entity going around trying to scare deaf people by firing a phantom gun near their ear?

Roderick Williams
Talgarth, Brecon

STRANGE AND SENSAONAL STORIES FROM

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JAN BONDESON presents more sensational stories and startling Victorian images from the "worst newspaper in England" – the *Illustrated Police News.*

37. THE MURDER OF A FORTUNE-TELLER?

In early January 1899, the Dutchman Willem de Swart, owner of a lodging-house at No 8 Whitfield Street near Tottenham Court Road, London, was dismayed to find that without consulting him, his wife had let two first-floor rooms to a German couple named Fritz and Augusta Briesenick. His qualms were not eased when he found that the two Germans appeared to be very queer characters. Fritz was a tall and good-looking youth, who said he was 25 years old, although he looked even younger. He introduced himself as an unemployed baker, but was well dressed and smoked expensive cigars. His 'wife' said she was 36 years old; although flashily dressed, she looked much older. But when Mrs Briesenick pulled out a large purse filled with gold sovereigns, to pay the rent in advance, the money-loving landlord immediately concluded that these strange Germans were good tenants.

In the coming months, de Swart kept a close eye on his weird lodgers. In spite of the vast difference in age, they seemed to be on good terms with each other, and never quarrelled. Fritz was a very idle fellow, who never showed any inclination to work. He seemed to be entirely dependent on his wife for money. Augusta was very coy about her line of business, until one day, de Swart saw an advertisement in a German newspaper published in London, where Mrs Briesenick claimed to be a distinguished fortune-teller, with access to life's hidden mysteries. When challenged, Fritz freely admitted that his wife worked as a masseuse and fortune-teller; she had several wealthy clients, one of them a famous German actress. De Swart did not approve of fortune-telling in his respectable house, but the regular rent payments made sure he did not press this point any further.

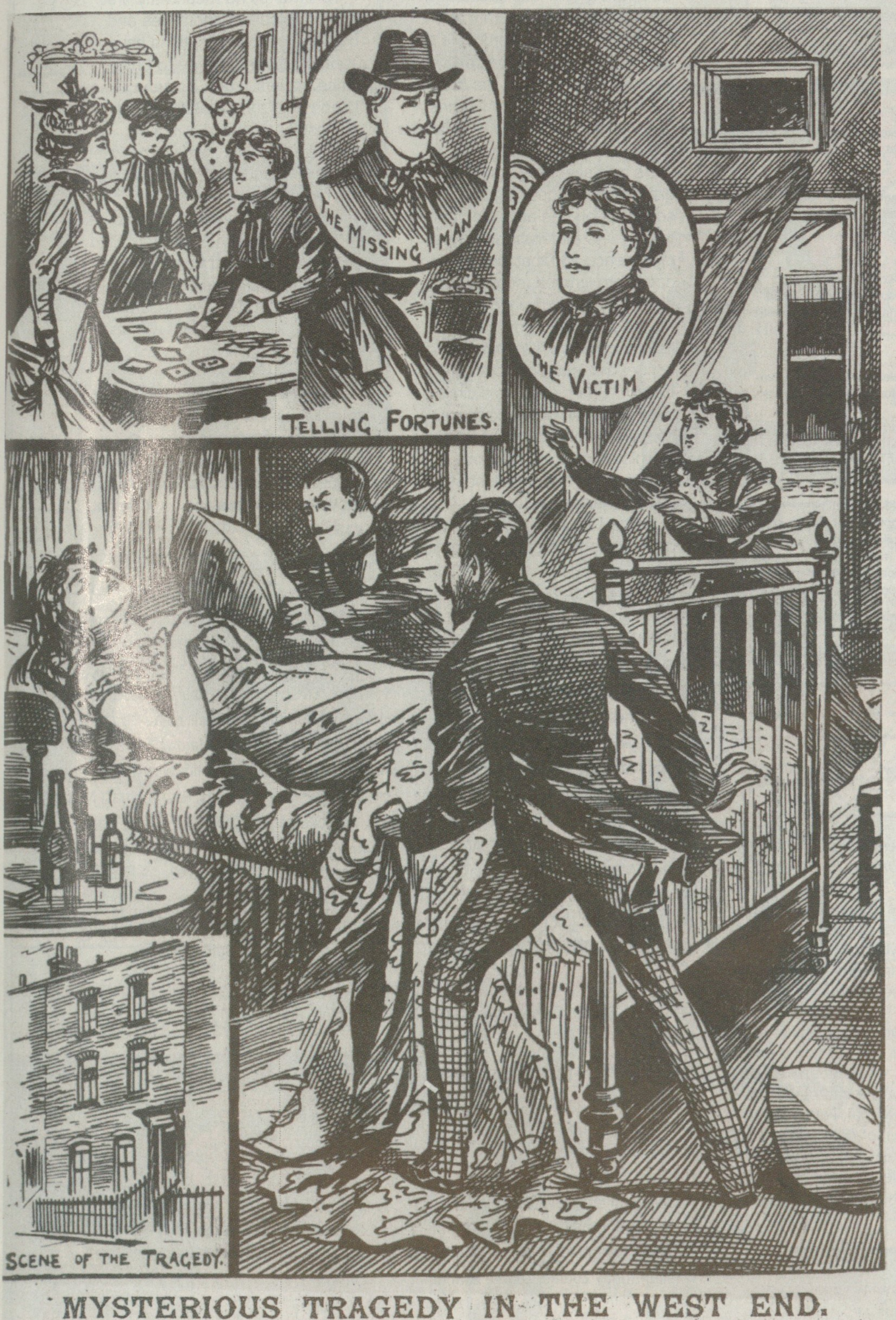
In March, Mrs Briesenick seemed intent on changing her career. She put another advertisement in the newspaper, seeking a post as house-keeper. Fritz continued to lounge about, smoking his expensive cigars, but the idle young German did not look as jaunty and carefree as before. In the late evening of 2 March, Willem de Swart was returning home after having enjoyed a few pints at the local pub. Looking up at the first-floor window of his house, he saw Fritz standing there, puffing at a cigar. He shouted "Hullo! Good evening, countryman! A nice night, eh?" but the lodger looked quite unlike his usual jovial self, merely replying "Yes, but I am going off to sleep. Good-night!"

This was the last Willem de Swart ever saw of the mysterious Fritz Briesenick. The next day, he received a postcard saying that the Briesenicks had gone away, but that they would return soon. But there was the matter of a very unpleasant smell emanating from Mrs Briesenick's room. When de Swart broke open the door, he could see a half-naked corpse lying on the bed. When the police arrived, the hysterical de Swart was running about gabbling inarticulately. Screaming "Mein Gott!" he opened the bedroom door, before running away. Two doctors arrived; they believed death had been the result of suffocation, and that the blackening of the dead woman's face had been caused by blows. Willem de Swart, his wife, and another lodger named Ghood all identified the deceased as Frau Augusta Briesenick. At the first session of the coroner's inquest, it was suspected that Fritz Briesenick had murdered his wife, before escaping.

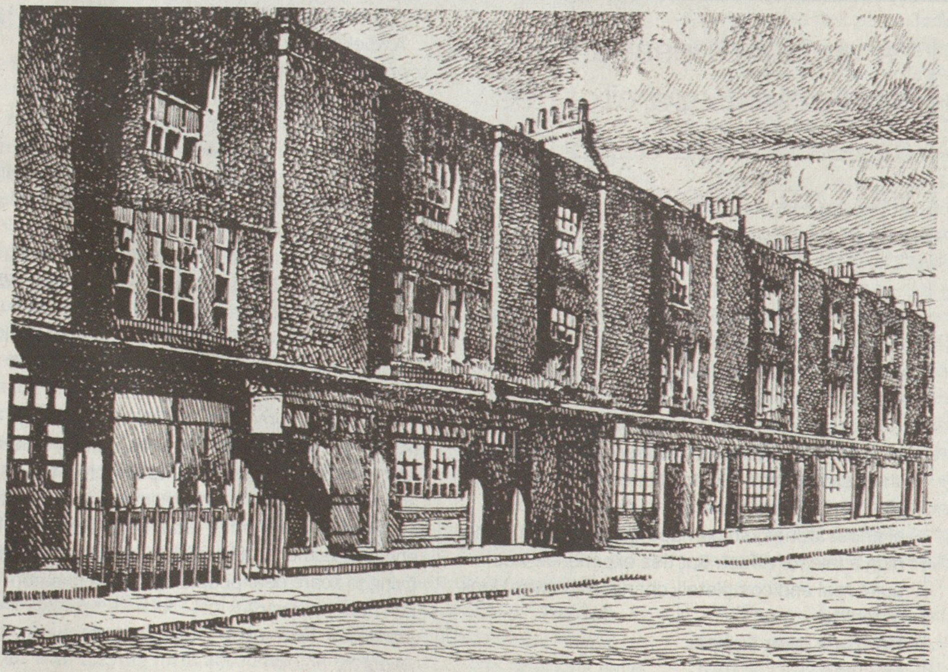
Giving evidence at the second session of the inquest, the servant Minnie Gransow testified that she had also seen the body of the deceased, and that she was certain it was *not* Augusta Briesenick. The corpse in the bedroom was that of a tall, stout woman; Frau Briesenick had been short and thin. Moreover, Augusta Briesenick's hair had looked very strange indeed: in the front, she wore a false fringe of greyish brown, in the middle her hair was bright red, and at the back, it was dyed jet black. The hair of the corpse exhibited no such peculiarities. Accordingly, the coroner had the body exhumed, to be inspected by a number of people who had known Augusta Briesenick. The de Swarts and Ghood changed their minds; they were now fully satisfied that the deceased was not the Augusta Briesenick they had known. Instead, the police found evidence that the corpse in the bedroom was the Swiss housemaid Sophie Richard, who had 'got into the family way' and consulted the sinister Frau Briesenick, whose bag of tricks apparently included performing abortions. Changing their minds, the doctors thought there might have been some mishap during the abortion, although they still favoured the idea that death had been the result of suffocation. Later, to confound things further, it was claimed that the corpse's intestines had contained traces of a certain chemical used as an abortifacient.

As the witnesses and doctors were dithering, the London detectives found evidence that the Briesenicks had absconded back to the Fatherland, presumably to Berlin. And sure enough, the Berlin detectives saw two queer-looking individuals disembarking from a train: a flashily dressed, middle-aged woman and a tall, indolent cove smoking a cigar. They were both arrested, and taken to the main police station. Since the German detectives had ways of making people talk, the young cigar-smoker was soon singing like a bird. His real name was Fritz Metz, and he had been apprentice to the wealthy Berlin baker and confectioner Adolf Briesenick. After the baker's *femme fatale* of a wife had seduced him, they had stolen Briesenick's money, and set off to London to start a new career as international criminals. The wicked Frau Briesenick had performed abortions, swindled people by telling their fortunes, and robbed a famous German actress who had employed her as a masseuse.

When Fritz Metz and Augusta Briesenick were tried in November 1899, the craven Metz turned Kaiser's evidence against his former partner in crime. He was duly acquitted, whereas Augusta Briesenick would have been severely dealt with, had she not "become insane and unable to plead", as *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* expressed it. She was duly detained in a lunatic asylum. It is a pity these extraordinary scenes were but rudimentarily summarised in the newspapers of the time: we will never know whether the straitjacketed Augusta Briesenick screamed "Burn in hell, you *Schweinhund*" at the coward Metz, or whether the latter, emerging from the court unscathed, took a welcome puff at his cigar before exclaiming: "Well, that was a *damned* close thing!" Did this strange character continue his life of crime, was he killed in the Great War, or did he live to fight another day, after Hitler had made Germany a country fit for scoundrels to live in?


THE MISSING MAN
THE VICTIM
TELLING FORTUNES.
SCENE OF THE TRAGEDY.

MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY IN THE WEST END.
A FORTUNE-TELLER FOUND DEAD IN BED WITH MARKS OF ILL-USAGE.



LEFT: The discovery of the body in the bedroom at 8 Whitfield Street, from *IPN*, 18 March 1899. **OPPOSITE**: A view of Whitfield Street; No 8 is one of many houses that no longer stand.

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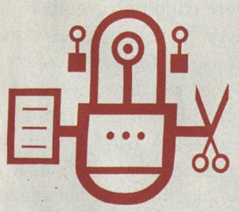

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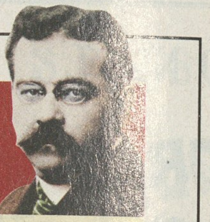

Why Fortean?

Fortean Times is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

From the viewpoint of mainstream science, its function is elegantly stated in a line from Enid Welsford's book on the mediæval fool: "The Fool does not lead a revolt against the Law; he lures us into a region of the spirit where... the writ does not run."

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox.

FT toes no party line.

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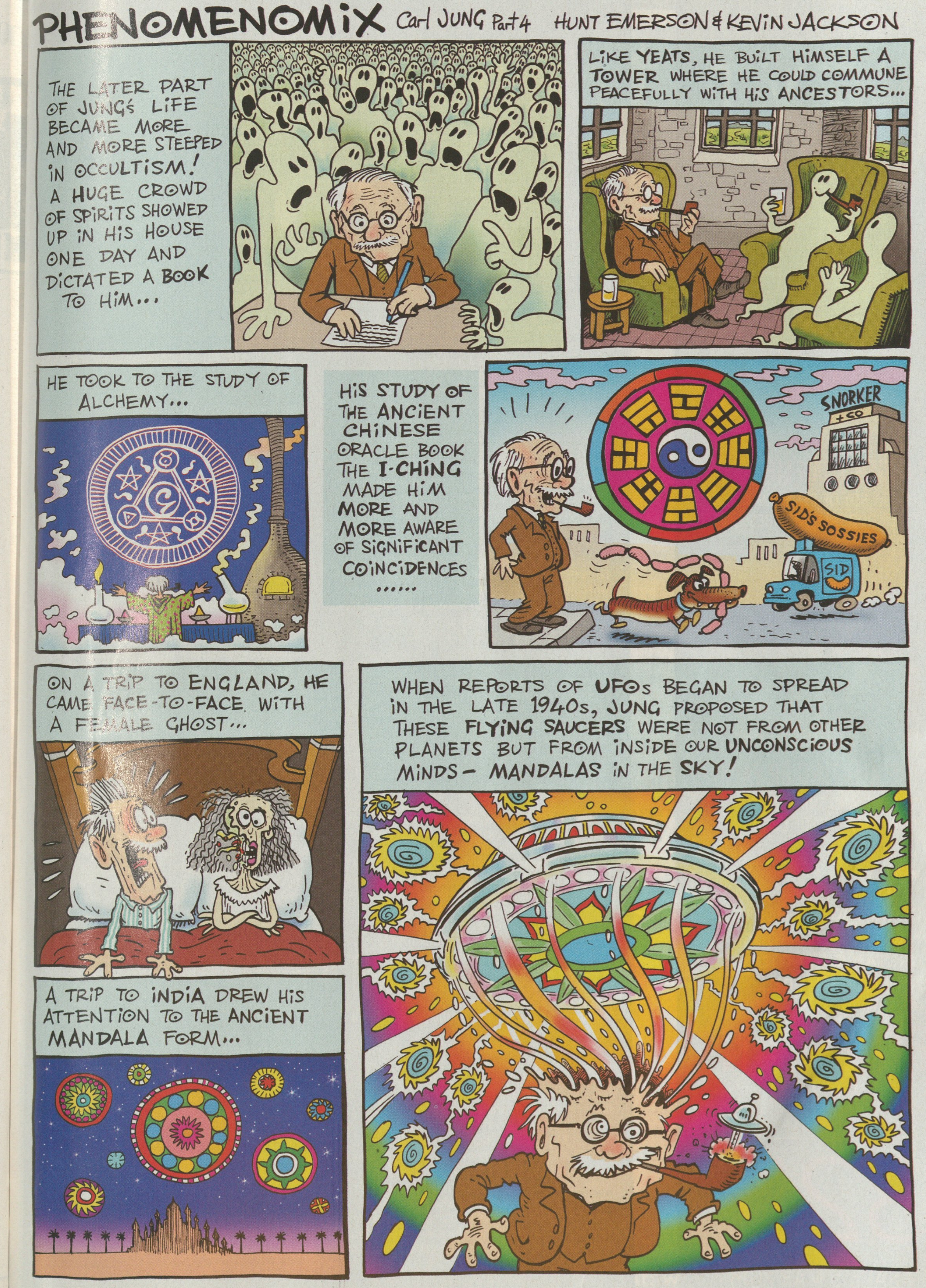
PHENOMENOMIX Carl JUNG Part 4 HUNT EMERSON & KEVIN JACKSON
THE LATER PART OF JUNG'S LIFE BECAME MORE AND MORE STEEPED IN OCCULTISM! A HUGE CROWD OF SPIRITS SHOWED UP IN HIS HOUSE ONE DAY AND DICTATED A BOOK TO HIM...
LIKE YEATS, HE BUILT HIMSELF A TOWER WHERE HE COULD COMMUNE PEACEFULLY WITH HIS ANCESTORS...
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ON A TRIP TO ENGLAND, HE CAME FACE-TO-FACE WITH A FEMALE GHOST...
WHEN REPORTS OF UFOs BEGAN TO SPREAD IN THE LATE 1940s, JUNG PROPOSED THAT THESE FLYING SAUCERS WERE NOT FROM OTHER PLANETS BUT FROM INSIDE OUR UNCONSCIOUS MINDS – MANDALAS IN THE SKY!
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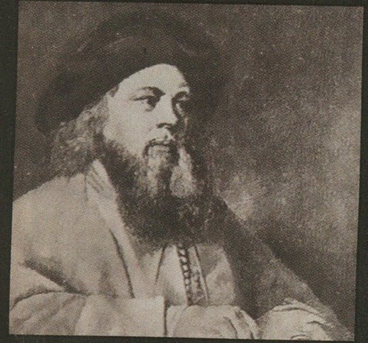
THE FAT BOY OF PECKHAM AND OTHER ODD TALES OF OBESITY



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+

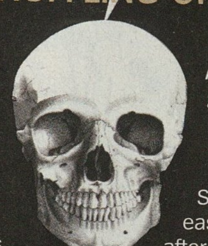
OVERWEIGHT GHOSTS, KILLER KANGAROOS, CRETAN CURISITIES AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 325

ON SALE 5 MAR 2015

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



Alan Catterall, 54, was burned alive on 23 December 2010 after his daughter's fiancé accidentally trapped him in an industrial oven that reached temperatures of 536°F (280°C). He had gone into the oven – at Pyranha Mouldings in Runcorn, Cheshire – to fix a fault when Mark Francis, 36, who was operating it, switched on the machine without realising that his prospective father-in-law was still working inside.

After the doors closed and locked automatically, Mr Catterall, a production supervisor, tried in vain to escape using a crowbar, and in the noisy factory his cries for help went unheard. No one realised he was trapped until smoke started seeping out 10 minutes later. He died of shock after suffering severe burns in the oven, which was used to manufacture plastic kayaks. Pyranha Mouldings Ltd was on trial accused on corporate manslaughter. *D.Telegraph, Times, D.Mail, 21 Nov 2014.*

Oscar Otero Aguilar, 21, accidentally shot himself in the head while posing for a 'selfie' with a loaded gun. He was drinking at home with two housemates in Mexico City when the incident took place. He died on the way to hospital. *D.Telegraph, 5 Aug 2014.*

A sheep breeder was killed on 17 March 2014 when he climbed into a grain silo and his bootlace became snared by a rotating auger (giant screw). Jim Sharp, 66, of Lauder in the Scottish Borders, was pulled the length of the auger and suffered multiple injuries as first his lace and then his overalls became trapped. The father of two was self-employed with no staff. *Metro, Sun, 5 Dec 2014.*

More than half the 57 people killed on Mount Ontake, the Japanese volcano, when it erupted last September died while taking pictures of the explosion on their smartphones. They were found still clutching their devices – many containing pictures of ash clouds taken in their final seconds. Medical experts said they suffered injuries from rocks and debris travelling at up to 190mph (300km/h) as they tried to flee the sudden explosion. Six people were still missing. On 12 November, pictures of dramatic ash clouds taken by victim Izumi Noguchi, 59, were released by his widow Hiromi in tribute to him. *D.Mail, 13 Nov 2014.*

A wild boar caused the death of a motorist on the M4 near Swindon on 5 January. The unnamed 47-year-old man, from Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire, was killed when his Seat Ibiza collided with animal before hitting a lorry. Wild boar were hunted to extinction in Britain at least 300 years ago, but have been making a comeback in the last few decades; they have virtually no natural predators. A fully-grown male can weigh up to 200kg (440lb), and the animals often stray onto roads. In 2013 there were 43 road accidents involving wild boar in the Forest of Dean, which for the first time was more than those involving deer. *D.Telegraph, 7 Jan 2015.*

A man of 47 choked to death on a glass eye after putting it in his mouth in Indian River, Florida. *Sun, 18 Oct 2014.*

Scores of mourners at a wake in north-eastern Mozambique fell sick and died after drinking contaminated *pombe*, a traditional beer made from millet or corn flour. Authorities believe the drink was poisoned with crocodile bile during the course of the funeral. Foul play, or misadventure? *D.Telegraph, 12 Jan 2015.*

A print boss in Wickford, Essex, was killed when he fell and slashed his neck on a metre-long paper guillotine blade. Alan Dinsdale, 56, was installing the newly sharpened device when he slipped in oil. *Sun, 23 Aug 2014.*

A two-year-old American boy accidentally shot and killed his mother after he reached into her purse, unzipped a pocket, found her gun and shot her in the head while the family were out shopping in a Wal-Mart store in Hayden, Ohio. Veronica Rutledge, 29, who had a concealed weapons permit, was reported to have been shopping in the electronics aisle with her son and three nieces. She died at the scene. About a third of American children live in homes containing guns. Of these, 43 per cent contain at least one unlocked firearm. At least 100 children were shot dead across the US in 2013. *D.Telegraph, 31 Dec 2014, 1 Jan 2015.*

Brendan McBride, 19, bled to death after getting his arm trapped in the metal hatch of a textile bank in Great Horton, West Yorkshire, owned by Save the Mothers Trust. He slipped after standing on a plastic container while trying to reach in and take clothes. *Sun, 17 Aug 2014.*

A crocodile killed Jacques van der Sandt, 29, on 3 December while he was retrieving golf balls from a dam called Lake Panic at Skukuza Golf Course in Kruger National Park, South Africa. The crocodile attacked him at about 10pm while he was standing at waist height in the water and reaching below the surface to feel for golf balls on the bottom of the dam. Rangers subsequently killed the 13ft (3.9m) crocodile after a two-hour search. About 280 people were attacked worldwide by crocodiles during 2014, according to CrocBITE, a website that tallies global crocodile attacks. *National Post (Toronto), 4 Dec 2014.*

A man died after a wingnut flew off a lorry, smashed his car's window and hit his head near Reichertshofen, Germany. *Sun, 16 Oct 2014.*

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